MYTHIC NARRATIVE IN THE WORK OF ELIZABETH GASKELL

by

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DECLARATION

Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work. It has not already been accepted in substance for any degree, and is not being concurrently submitted in a candidature for any other degree.

(Signed) Janet C. Lawrence ..... Date 24/11/93...

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Literary commentators tell us that the act of narration is closely connected with our mortality. Because we cannot know our own ends we find satisfaction in fictional endings. Frank Kermode theorizes that as we are born into, and die from, the middle of events, we need "fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems." In experiencing fictions, we are enabled to "project ourselves . . . past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle."[1]

More recently, Peter Brooks has written of our persistent desire for plots and structure, even though in this century we have become far more aware of the artifice implicit in the fabrication of plots. Brooks defines the term "plot" in the following words: "Plot as I conceive it is the design of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning."[2] The focus of his study is upon classic realist[3] novels of the nineteenth century, for Brooks believes there are

> some historical moments at which plot has assumed a greater importance than at others, moments in which cultures have seemed to develop an unquenchable thirst for plots and to seek the expression

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[1]Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 7 & 8.

[2]Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984) xi.

[3]The critical literature on the term "realism" is immense. I use the term here in what David Lodge describes as "a formal sense . . . to denote a particular mode of presentation which, roughly speaking, treats fictional events as if they were a kind of history, or in a more qualitative sense, to denote a literary aesthetic of truth-telling" in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (London: Routledge, 1971) 4.

> of central individual and collective meanings through narrative design.[4]

Brooks identifies one of these "historical moments" as the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. He suggests that

> the enormous narrative production of the nineteenth century may suggest an anxiety at the loss of providential plots: the plotting of the individual or social or institutional life story takes on new urgency when one no longer can look to a sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world.[5]

In order to create such narratives, it is necessary that some spot in the continuity of life be circumscribed, so that a particular segment may be isolated and examined. Henry James expresses this necessity in his famous preface to *Roderick Hudson*:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so.[6]

According to James, the narrative contained within that circle is in itself a whole - and a whole, in Aristotle's definition, "is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end."[7] Each constituent part of a narrative can, therefore, only be defined by its relation to the whole.

Although literary structure has been much discussed since Aristotle's day, it is only since the 1960s that

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[4]Brooks 5.

[5]Brooks 6.

[6]Henry James, preface, *Roderick Hudson* (1876; New York: Harper, 1960) 8.

[7]Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, *Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. T.S. Dorsch, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 41.

"closure" has become the subject of critical attention.[8] Chris Baldick provides two definitions of closure:

> the sense of completion or resolution at the end of a literary work . . . [or] in literary criticism, the reduction of a work's meanings to a single and complete sense that excludes the claims of other interpretations.[9]

It is the first definition with which I am primarily concerned in this thesis, (the second involves critical procedure of a type that I am not intending to follow). Closure, in this first sense, can be characterized in a number of ways, such as satisfactory resolution of the plot, or the manner in which the novel concludes. It may also be characterized as the aesthetic cohesion of the work - in New Critical terms the harmony which ideally exists within a work of art.

The closely-plotted Victorian novel usually provides strong narrative closure (defined in this case as a decided sense of resolution), epitomizing Brooks' claim about the desire for plots, and the accompanying desire for resolution. However, from the end of the nineteenth century, and increasingly in the twentieth century, writers have attempted to produce open-ended narratives. The contrast between "open" and "closed" texts has been the subject of debate in modern criticism. Roland Barthes' theory of the *lisible* text - described in his influential book *S/Z* (1970) - posits the difference between "readerly"

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[8]Much interest in closure was inspired by Barbara Herrnstein Smith, *Poetic Closure* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1968).

[9]Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990) 38.

(*lisible*) texts and "writerly" (*scriptible*) texts. Barthes' readerly texts, again in Baldick's definition, are usually in the realistic tradition and "involve no true participation from the reader other than the consumption of a fixed meaning."[10] Such a text can readily be understood "in terms of already familiar conventions and expectations, and is thus reassuringly 'closed'."[11] (Whether there is any text which can be reduced to a "fixed meaning" is debatable. Barthes' theory appears to assume that texts are always read under the same conditions and that readers are a homogeneous group with identical expectations.) The writerly text, in contrast, "challenges the reader to produce its meanings from an open play of possibilities."[12] Wallace Martin comments of such texts:

> At its extreme, modern narrative may even reject its own intelligibility as a means of taking on existence as an object: it becomes a text, an opaque collection of words that do not refer to any other world, real or imaginary.[13]

Classic realist nineteenth-century novels, however, have a tendency to be "reassuringly closed," although closure must always be a matter of degree, and different novels may engender a greater or lesser sense of completion. Neither is closure synonymous with ending, although it must necessarily involve the ending. Closure embraces the whole narrative.

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[10] Baldick 123.

[11] Baldick 123.

[12] Baldick 123.

[13] Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 83.

The classic realism of many nineteenth-century novels involves, as Lodge's definition above suggests, presenting fictional events as though they were an accurate record of an actual way of life. Such novels may, therefore, present a dilemma of narrative resolution for the writer when they deal with contemporary social problems for which no straightforward solutions exist. In her book, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels*, Deirdre David suggests that many nineteenth-century novels attempt to mediate between faithfully recording contemporary social conditions and the desire of their (usually middle-class) readers that those conditions should be different. This mediation is performed in the novels by the creation of fables - David's "fictions of resolution." Thus, David suggests, "the tension between representation of social actuality and desire for difference is mythically resolved in fictions of one sort of another."[14] David, no doubt wisely, uses the term "fable" or "fiction" and avoids the more controversial term "myth," other than adverbially, as in the quotation given above. The careful terminology of her work is also apparent in her use of "actuality" rather than "reality." One of the novels which Deirdre David analyses is Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* and I include this novel in my own analysis. However, while employing David's study as a starting point, I believe the term "mythic narrative" best describes my own understanding

[14]Deirdre David, *Fictions of Resolution in Three Victorian Novels: North and South, Our Mutual Friend, Daniel Deronda* (London: Macmillan, 1981) ix-x.

of the mediating fictions to which David's work calls attention. As I shall argue that mythic narratives resonate with, or tap into, prevailing social myths, a precise definition of what I mean by myth is necessary.

In order to clarify my use of the term myth, I shall first exclude some definitions. By myth, I do not mean "a false or unreliable story or belief," nor am I referring to a kind of universal archetype, as represented in Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious or Northrop Frye's seasonal genres. I should also make it clear that I am not defining myth in the strictly anthropological sense of the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. My usage is a more usual literary one, where myths are defined as "fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence." I see these "collective attitudes" not as universal, but as the attitudes of a particular society at a particular moment in history. Myths, in this sense, provide "a superior intuitive mode" of understanding within such a society.[15]

Gillian Beer has observed that problem-solving is often regarded as the primary function of myth. But rather than solving problems, Beer suggests, "mythologising may be as much a way of keeping problems in suspense as of solving

[15]All quoted definitions from Baldick 143.

them. It makes endurable the contemplation of irreconcilable contraries."[16] With this observation in mind, I should like to extend Deirdre David's theory to suggest that the mediating fables - or mythic narratives - which emerge from many Victorian novels do not so much resolve problems as enable the toleration of paradox. Conflicts which are depicted overtly in nineteenth-century novels, and which are apparently resolved, are often shadowed by underlying, unstated conflicts for which there is no simple solution - and this constitutes the paradox at the heart of the mythic narrative. Myths may both generate the desire for, and show the impossibility of, resolution. Closure in novels is very effective, I suggest, when a mythic narrative is created which maintains conflicting ideas in suspension, enabling "irreconcilable contraries" to be held in balance. This is particularly successful when that mythic narrative resonates with overarching myths prevalent in contemporary society. Such a balancing in the mythic narrative gives an aesthetic cohesion to the novel which provides a strong sense of closure.

Elizabeth Gaskell's novels, and her biography of Charlotte Brontë, are used in this thesis to illustrate closure, not in terms of an Aristotelian sense of the appropriate relationship of beginning, middle and end, nor the Jamesian sense of circumscription, but in terms of aesthetic cohesion. In Gaskell's case, that cohesion comes

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[16]Gillian Beer, *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin* (London: Routledge, 1983) 114.

about through the achievement of a balance between the world as it is and the world as it could be. Novels - and biographies for that matter - are not, of course, independent entities but phenomena of the cultural and social conditions from which they spring. Gaskell's work lends support to Brooks' contention that social anxieties, resulting from the questioning of old religious (and other) certainties, are reflected in a demand for strong narrative plots which function to give a sense of meaning and order to life. The social tensions which are portrayed in Gaskell's novels arise largely from the rapidity of change in nineteenth-century society. The context in which the novels are set is one of industrial unrest, increasing awareness of the oppression of women, epistemological uncertainties resulting from declining religious belief, and an intense interest in science and development of new evolutionary theories (culminating in the work of Charles Darwin).

Elizabeth Gaskell's work draws upon many prevailing social myths. Those which predominate are: the myth of progress - progress in any form, industrial or social, is always beneficial and part of God's universal plan; the Christian myth - social problems can be solved through good will and the awakening of a sense of social responsibility in all people; the myth of scientism - developments and discoveries in science mean that mankind is reaching a pinnacle of development and will soon be able to explain the universe; the Angel in the House myth - domestic felicity is sacred and woman is the soothing, morally uplifting influence on man, confined within the private

sphere of the home; and the myth of emigration - there is an alternative place in which fortunes can be made. These myths, and the paradoxes which they encompass, are discussed at greater length in Chapter 2, which deals with *Mary Barton*. Not all Gaskell's narratives draw upon all these myths and they may also contain traces of many others. Only the myths which predominate are discussed in each case.

In the first chapter of the thesis, I describe the background to Elizabeth Gaskell's writing: her own position as a Dissenter, the intense interest of the period in theories of political economy, and the observations of two contemporary social commentators (Frederick Engels and Leon Faucher) on conditions in Manchester in the 1840s. I go on to discuss closure, through the medium of mythic narrative, in Gaskell's work. I treat the texts chronologically, the second chapter being devoted to *Mary Barton*. In this chapter I discuss the myths in more detail, argue that all five are present in this text, and examine the way in which closure takes the form of aesthetic cohesion as the paradoxes contained in the myths are balanced in the mythic narrative. In the third chapter I compare Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* with a modern novel, David Lodge's *Nice Work*, the plot of which owes much to *North and South*. The purpose of the comparison is to illuminate *North and South*, a "condition-of-England" novel for the 1850s, through the use of a "condition-of-England" novel for the 1980s. David Lodge's *Nice Work* offers the opportunity to examine some nineteenth-century myths in the light of some of those of the twentieth century. I explore

the similarities in plot of the two novels, their use of prevailing social myths, the mythic narratives which emerge and the significance these elements have for closure. In this chapter I also discuss the emergence of gender issues in *North and South*. In the fourth chapter, the discussion broadens to include non-fiction: Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. I discuss the way in which the "plot" of the biography is constructed around the myth of the Angel in the House, and the implications this has for closure, and I examine the development of mythic narrative in a "factual" text. The fifth chapter returns to consideration of fiction with *Wives and Daughters*, the novel which Elizabeth Gaskell had almost completed at the time of her unexpected death. In this chapter I explore the influence which writing the *Life* had on Gaskell's subsequent work and the tensions manifested in *Wives and Daughters*. Finally, and I think most importantly, I discuss the implications for the mythic narrative - and therefore for closure as aesthetic cohesion - of the fact that Elizabeth Gaskell did not supply her own ending to the plot of *Wives and Daughters*. In the conclusion, I provide a brief summary of the findings of the thesis.

CHAPTER 1 - BACKGROUND

In a letter dated 13 January 1849, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote:

> My poor Mary Barton is stirring up all sorts of angry feelings against me in Manchester; but those best acquainted with the way of thinking & feeling among the poor acknowledge its *truth*; which is the acknowledgment I most of all desire, because evils being once recognized are half way on towards their remedy.[1]

Although comfortably of the middle class herself, Gaskell wrote not as a member of the Anglican Establishment[2] but as something of an outsider. As a Dissenter - she and her husband, the Reverend William Gaskell, were Unitarians - she stood slightly apart from traditional deference to the total authority of the established Church and State. Unitarians were not then strictly considered to be Christians because of their non-acceptance of the divinity of Christ, whom they understood rather as the supreme human example of how a life should ideally be lived. The Unitarian emphasis was on the use of personal moral judgment, and therefore of the necessity to educate all - women and men alike - to the point where they are capable of making informed and responsible judgments. This set Unitarians apart from most other religious denominations,

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[1]Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, eds. J.A.V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1966) *GL* 39a (827). References to the letters will be footnoted as "*GL*", followed by the letter number and then the page number in brackets.

[2]I use the word "Establishment" in the sense given by the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd Edition, 1991, at definition 8b: "a social group exercising power generally, or within a given field or institution, by virtue of its traditional superiority, and by the use especially of tacit understandings and often a common mode of speech, and having as a general interest the maintenance of the *status quo*."

many of whom considered the education of women to be at best unnecessary, and at worst a positive danger.

Gaskell was certainly no fomenter of revolution but she felt most strongly the responsibility of the middle class to alleviate the lot of the poor. In another letter, also referring to the furore produced amongst Manchester manufacturers by *Mary Barton*, she makes her position clear:

> I do think we must all acknowledge that there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not see how; but surely there is no harm in directing the attention to the existence of such evils. No one can feel more deeply than I how *wicked* it is to do anything to excite class against class; and the sin has been most unconscious if I have done so.[3]

Although writing as an outsider in Establishment terms, Elizabeth Gaskell wrote very much as an insider as far as conditions in Manchester in her day were concerned. As a minister's wife, she had occasion to visit the appalling courts and cellars occupied by the very poor and did not rely upon government reports for her descriptions (as did Disraeli when writing *Sybil: or The Two Nations*).

Both the Gaskells became extremely interested in the customs and history of their adopted city. William Gaskell gave lectures at working men's clubs and advised his wife on the speech patterns of the characters in *Mary Barton*. Elizabeth Gaskell met and greatly admired Samuel Bamford, the weaver-poet and reformist leader whose *Passages in the Life of a Radical* gives a graphic, eye-witness account of

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[3] *GL* 36 (67).

the Peterloo Massacre. Bamford was at this time an old man and a fervent admirer of Tennyson. Gaskell, on finding that Bamford had no book of Tennyson's poetry and could not afford to buy one, obtained an autographed copy, with which Bamford was delighted.[4] This incident should not be taken to indicate that Gaskell had radical sympathies - her admiration seems to have been for Samuel Bamford's poetry rather than his politics - but she certainly had strong local sympathies for Manchester and its inhabitants.

In order to understand the context in which Gaskell's novels were written, it is necessary to examine something of the economic - and other - discourses of her time. Adam Smith's *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, had proved to have a far reaching influence on contemporary thought on matters of political economy. The main tenets of this work are described by Gertrude Himmelfarb as:

> the division of labor making for increased productivity and thus the increased 'opulence' of all of society; the fundamental facts of human nature - self-interest (or 'self-love') and the 'propensity to truck, barter, and exchange' - which were the generating force of the economic process; the 'invisible hand'. . . which made the individual's interest an instrument for the general good; and the 'system of natural liberty' which was the only certain means to achieve both the wealth of nations and the welfare of individuals.[5]

The publication of Smith's book coincided, of course, with the American Declaration of Independence and also with the

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[4] *GL* 50 (84-5), 56 (92-3), and 59 (94-5).

[5] Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The Idea of Poverty: England in the Early Industrial Age* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984) 46.

development of the industrial revolution. The *Wealth of Nations* itself had a profound effect on ideas of political economy, not so much because of the novelty of Smith's ideas - for very similar ones had been propounded before - but because he had developed his views into a total economic theory. While Smith was a strong advocate of free trade, the phrase "*laissez-faire*" does not actually appear in the *Wealth of Nations*. Adam Smith's is a basically optimistic view of a "progressive" society in which wages are kept high by the expansion occasioned by ever-increasing demand. In such a society, the living standards of all, including the working class, would constantly improve.

The title of Smith's book refers, as Himmelfarb points out, "not to the nation in the mercantilist sense . . . but to the people comprising the nation" and not only to those having a political voice but to all those living and working in the nation, including the lowest ranks and the very poor.[6] Adam Smith had been Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University from 1752-64 and the *Wealth of Nations*, often perceived purely as a work of economic theory, is also a work of moral philosophy.

Followers of Smith, particularly Malthus and Ricardo, removed political economy from its connection to moral philosophy and presented it as a "natural science." Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798) expounded the theory that while population increases

[6]Himmelfarb 50.

geometrically, the means of subsistence only increase arithmetically. Because of this, a "natural law" exists which provides "checks" on the size of population in the form of poverty, disease, and starvation. Malthus's theories were vehemently attacked by Hazlitt, Cobbett, and Carlyle amongst many others. But, as Gertrude Himmelfarb comments: "If Malthus was the best-abused man of his time, he was also one of the most influential."[7] His influence on David Ricardo was considerable. Ricardo, who published his *On the Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* in 1817, would be categorized in today's terms as the archetypal "dry" economist. Himmelfarb summarizes the Malthusian legacy as follows:

> It is not too much to say that England in the first half of the nineteenth century was in a state of moral and intellectual turmoil, as some people tried to assimilate the message of Malthusianism, others frantically resisted it, and still others found themselves caught up in a mode of thought and feeling that seemed to be intellectually irresistible and morally repulsive.[8]

Many were unhappy with the results of policies based upon theories of political economy. Thomas Carlyle savagely attacked *laissez-faire* policies not only because of the danger of revolution which he believed they bred, but also because of the whole moral climate which resulted from them. In a phrase which has become famous - it is used by Gaskell's John Thornton in *North and South* - Carlyle compared his own era unfavourably with feudal

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[7]Himmelfarb 126.

[8]Himmelfarb 133.

times: "*Cash Payment* had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man."[9] It was Carlyle who first christened political economy the "dismal science."

The widespread interest which the whole subject of political economy aroused may be gauged by the popularity of Harriet Martineau's short stories, *Illustrations of Political Economy*, published in nine volumes between 1832 and 1834. It is estimated that they averaged a monthly sale of around ten thousand copies, reaching 144,000 readers.[10] In such a climate, the subject matter of Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel was extremely topical.

Mary Barton is very much a narrative of its time, shaped by the discourses of its day, and arising from the immense cultural flux of Manchester in the 1840s. Manchester at that time was often seen as something of a social laboratory. Commentators from Europe visited the city to observe conditions, for it was regarded as a site of change and modernity. The best known of such commentators is, of course, Frederick Engels, whose *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* devotes much space to Manchester where Engels spent some years managing one of his father's factories. Engels' book was published in Germany in 1845 but was not available in English until forty years later, when an American woman (Mrs Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky) translated and

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[9]Thomas Carlyle, "Chartism" in *English and Other Critical Essays*. Everyman's Library (London: Dent, 1967) 203.

[10]R.K Webb, *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (London: William Heinemann, 1960) 113.

published it in New York in 1886. However, according to Engels' own preface to the 1892 edition, it had "never been extensively circulated on this [the European] side of the Atlantic."[11]

In the same year a Frenchman, Leon Faucher, also published his observations on Manchester, entitled *Manchester in 1844*.[12] This book is an English translation of two articles by Faucher originally appearing in the *Revue des deux Mondes* as "Studies upon England." The title page bears the words: "Translated from the French, with copious notes appended, by A Member of the Manchester Athenaeum." So copious are the notes, in fact, that some pages contain more footnotes than text. The instances where the translator's opinions differ from those of Faucher make interesting reading and a comparison of the differing "plots" of Engels' and Faucher's accounts is also instructive. As written history is no longer regarded as a factual account but as a narrative construct, the use of the term "plot" is, I think, quite permissible. I use it in the sense of Peter Brooks' definition already quoted: "the design of narrative, what shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning."

Engels writes of the history of the industrial revolution and the creation of a huge proletariat. He

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[11]Frederick Engels, preface to *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, trans. Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky (1892; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1936) v.

[12]Leon Faucher, *Manchester in 1844: Its Present Condition and Future Prospects*, Cass Library of Industrial Classics No.28 (1844; London: Frank Cass, 1969).

studies conditions in England (rather than his native Germany) because "England is the classic soil of this transformation . . . Only in England can the proletariat be studied in all its relations and from all sides."[13] He concentrates particularly on Manchester, when describing housing for the working class, because "Manchester is the classic type of a modern manufacturing town."[14]

The "plot" of Engels' account is concerned with the insidious growth of capitalism and of the power of the bourgeoisie. He describes the centralisation of manufacture, resulting in independent artisans being forced to move to industrial centres and losing the opportunity of owning small plots of land where they might grow much of their own food: being reduced, in fact, to owning nothing but their labour. Engels' plot tells of the poverty and starvation of many of the working class, and of their jerry-built homes which badly affect health:

> . . . we must admit that 350,000 working-people of Manchester and its environs live, almost all of them, in wretched, damp, filthy cottages, that the streets which surround them are usually in the most miserable and filthy condition, laid out without the slightest reference to ventilation, with reference solely to the profit secured by the contractor."[15]

The health of workers is also undermined by inhumanly long hours of work and dangerous industrial practices. Even very young children are exploited. The most extreme case

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[13]Engels 1.

[14]Engels 20.

[15]Engels 63.

Engels mentions is of a child of two found working in a lace-making factory by a Children's Employment Commissioner.[16] Engels describes the history of labour movements such as Chartism, socialism, and the infant trades unions and concludes that a revolution of the working class is imminent: "Then, indeed, will the war-cry resound through the land: 'War to the palaces, peace to the cottages!' - but then it will be too late for the rich to beware."[17] The nature of Engels' plot is thus apocalyptic: resoundingly closed by resolution.

Faucher's plot is of a different nature, a plot of reform rather than revolution, although there are some points of agreement with Engels. He conducts a far broader examination of the condition of Manchester. Like Engels, he writes of the history of Britain, but Faucher's history is mainly concerned with the emergence of Manchester as an industrial centre. He refers to the geography, as well as the history, of the whole region of southern Lancashire as an introduction to the contemporary state of Manchester, before concentrating upon the city itself. In addition to the question of working class housing in Manchester, he discusses the number of churches and notes the large number of Dissenters, compared with adherents of the Established Church. He talks of law and order issues including the policing of Manchester; civic issues such as street cleaning arrangements; he describes Manchester's gin

[16]Engels 191.

[17]Engels 298.

palaces, charitable institutions, mortality rates, crime, and prostitution, amongst many other topics. He suggests that many of Manchester's problems arise from the rapidity of its growth, remarking that as fast as improvements are made in the paving of streets and installation of sewerage in the central districts, new streets, just as bad as the others were previously, multiply on the outskirts. When speaking of what he terms "the extent of intemperance" amongst the working class, Faucher complains that there are "no public promenades, no avenues, no public gardens; and even no public common" for the people of Manchester to enjoy in their leisure time. Everything in the suburbs is privately owned and closed against them. "Even the cemeteries and the Botanic Gardens, are closed upon the Sunday. What remains but the brutal diversion of drunkenness?" he concludes.[18]

Both Engels and Faucher take many of their facts on the conditions of workers from the same source: a pamphlet by Dr James Kay, a Health Commissioner. Engels gives the full reference as: "'The Moral and Physical Condition of the Working-Classes Employed in the Cotton Manufacture in Manchester.' By James Ph. Kay, M.D. 2nd Ed. 1832." (He adds the following note to this reference: "Dr. Kay confuses the working-class in general with the factory workers, otherwise an excellent pamphlet."[19]) Faucher refers to the work by an abbreviation of the title and

[18]Faucher 56.

[19]Engels 49, n1.

mention of the author. Dr Kay later became Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, well-known to both Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë.

Faucher's narrative is concerned, in its first part, with a conscientious attempt to describe accurately and in detail the condition of Manchester, which fascinates him in its guise of social laboratory, and, in its second part, with ways in which reform might be effected. He says of the city: "Manchester . . . is itself an agglomeration the most extraordinary, the most interesting, and in some respects, the most monstrous, which the progress of society has presented."[20] His plot is shadowed by the translator's own plot, which is often in agreement with Faucher on matters of reform but which differs when the extremely partisan translator perceives what he considers to be an unfair criticism by Faucher. Faucher's comment, mentioned above, on the lack of public space is taken up in a long footnote which includes the following:

> During the last few months a project for the establishment of Public Walks and Parks has been proposed and adopted by the public, with an unanimity and energy which does honour to the public spirit of the town, and which will speedily wipe off the stigma under which it has hitherto laboured, as being regardless of the health and enjoyment of the working classes.[21]

Much more strongly resented is Faucher's statistic that in Manchester, each year, the police deal with five thousand lost or abandoned children. The translator calls this a

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[20]Faucher 16.

[21]Faucher 55, n25.

libel upon the people of Manchester, but forgives Faucher whom he believes has been misled by fallacious statements. Another statement of Faucher's (very similar to one of Engels) that it is difficult to recruit Lancashire men fit enough or tall enough for military service is stoutly denied by the translator in this surprisingly radical footnote:

> The men of the manufacturing districts are too well off, and have too much sense to join a profession which is daily growing disreputable. They begin to see that bad governments could not exist, or tyrannical laws be enforced, if the working classes refused to enlist and take up arms against their fellow creatures. A red coat and a daily ration is, after all, a poor exchange for the loss of liberty. The masses are beginning to understand this, and thereby hangs a tale![22]

Faucher and his translator are united, however, in their belief in free trade. Speaking of cotton manufacture, Faucher asserts "Freedom of trade is, for this industry, a question of life or death."[23] The translator's prescription for a better future, "which the public mind of Manchester is endeavouring to realize," consists of 1) freedom of trade; 2) sanitary regulations; and 3) a comprehensive system of secular education. This Member of the Manchester Athenaeum is not entirely convinced of the infallibility of the policies of Church and State - at least not where Manchester is concerned.

The second half of Faucher's book deals with the answers, in terms of reform, to some of the horrendous

[22]Faucher 72, n33.

[23]Faucher 140.

problems described in the first part. The author poses the rhetorical question: "Are the disorders which manifest themselves in the large centres of industry, a necessary consequence of the manufacturing system?"[24] and answers his own question as follows:

> But I cannot believe that Providence has given to mankind such maleficent institutions. It is not possible that the progress of the industrial arts can have for a necessary result, the degradation of the human race.[25]

He goes on to describe, as a part of the solution, what could perhaps be termed "model" factories, usually in rural areas outside Manchester. Faucher is a believer in the decentralization of industry and thinks that these factories, though he perceives many faults in them, show the direction which reform should take:

> The superiority of rural over urban manufacture, is a conclusion, not only deduced from reasoning, but if I mistake not, a matter of experience also. And although the examples which may be cited are imperfect, yet they contain the germs of a better state of society for the labouring classes.[26]

Faucher's reservations mainly concern the control over the lives of the operatives exerted by the employers, whom he describes as "intelligent and benevolent men." Much that has been achieved by these employers in the treatment of their workers "reflects the greatest honour upon their country." Faucher continues: "There is at least protection

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[24]Faucher 89.

[25]Faucher 90.

[26]Faucher 93.

for the operative, though I dare not affirm that he enjoys more liberty."[27]

The reform which Faucher urges most strongly, however, and which he sees as having the greatest potential to solve the problems created by industrialization, is that workers should share in the profits of the company employing them:

> I am firmly convinced, that the first manufacturer who shall have the courage to invite his work-people to an interest in the profits of the establishment, will be no sufferer by the experiment. Such a concession would attract to him the very best class of operatives; the labour would be accomplished with more care and zeal; and the produce would increase in quantity, and improve in quality. He would establish between himself and his workmen, an intimate and permanent union, which would be proof against time and circumstances. Those who had been associated with him in times of prosperity, would remain with him more willingly in times of reverse; and the burden of bad times would be more easily borne, when each cheerfully sustained his share. Combinations would cease, both on the part of the work-people, and on the part of the masters, for they would no longer have an object to attain.[28]

In many instances, Engels and Faucher agree on what they see. Both have observed, as they could hardly fail to, the hostility shown by the workers towards the capitalists. Faucher comments that the day of the Luddites has now gone and that the operatives "are reconciled with mechanical power, but they are more opposed than ever to the capitalist who puts the power in movement. Their hostility has changed its object, it has passed from machinery to the capitalist."[29] Engels' observation is:

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[27]Faucher 126.

[28]Faucher 130.

[29]Faucher 151.

"and when we take into consideration all the circumstances in which this class lives, we shall not think the worse of it for the resentment which it cherishes against the ruling class."[30]

Another area of agreement between the reports of Engels and Faucher is that the introduction of new machinery results in job losses. Engels believes that "Every new advance brings with it loss of employment, want, and suffering"[31] and Faucher that "each mechanical improvement has the effect of diminishing the number of hands requisite in each department of industry." Faucher's translator disagrees, however, and argues that mechanical improvements increase cheapness and therefore demand, so that more hands are required, not less.[32]

The long hours of factory workers are criticized by both commentators, and both mention the fact the many of the child workers sleep through the whole day on Sunday, so exhausted are they. But the cause of the long working day is seen differently. Engels regards the long hours from his own political standpoint: as being forced upon the workers by the capitalists, purely for the sake of squeezing as much profit as possible from their labour. Faucher, however, takes a nationalistic view and condemns overwork as a national sickness of the English, pervading all classes of society. This could be seen as a peculiarly

[30]Engels 115.

[31]Engels 139.

[32]Faucher 12 & 12, n4.

Catholic comment on the Protestant work ethic. After asserting that the Lancashire worker is the best in the world, but that the ceaseless energy he expends undermines his health, Faucher continues:

> Over-working is a malady which Lancashire has inflicted upon England, and which England in its turn has inflicted upon Europe. Manchester is the seat, the concentrated focus of this malady; a malady which is felt in every portion of the kingdom, and which is now interwoven with the habits and constitution of the country.[33]

(Surprisingly, Faucher's translator makes no reply to this - perhaps because he is fully occupied, at this stage in the text, with a footnote which spreads over the best part of nine pages, on the evils of religious education and the necessity for secular schools.) In answer to those who say that factory work is light and pleasant compared with many occupations, Faucher comments astutely (and well ahead of his time) that "It is not the *intensity* of the labour which most fatigues the human frame - it is the *uninterruptedness* of it."[34]

In his Preface to Faucher's account of Manchester, the Member of the Manchester Athenaeum asserts his own belief in a divine order:

> A [manufacturing] system, such as this, however anomalous it may appear, cannot be the result of chance. It is equally certain, that it was never planned by human intelligence, for so sudden has been its growth, that we have neither succeeded in fully comprehending it, nor in adapting our social institutions to its new requirements.[35]

[33] Faucher 83.

[34] Faucher 117.

[35] Faucher vii-viii.

Implicit in these words is a feeling of uncertainty as to the benign omnipotence of providence and the social benefits of industrial progress. The rapidity with which industrialization had proceeded and its all too visible results upon many workers tended to destabilize notions of providence and progress. The passage betrays some, perhaps unconscious, ambivalence. If the manufacturing system "was never planned by human intelligence," the inference drawn at first reading would probably be that the system is part of a divine plan. However, in spite of the statement that the system "cannot be the result of chance," the reference to the suddenness of the system's growth carries an uneasy connotation of something monstrous (an aspect which Faucher had himself remarked on when he described Manchester as "most extraordinary, most interesting, most monstrous"), which perpetuates itself and multiplies haphazardly without mind or intelligence and therefore contains the threat of randomness and chaos. Such an interpretation suggests that the phenomenon that was Manchester challenged optimistic views of progress, an idea which also appears in Elizabeth Gaskell's novels.

Sociological texts, such as those of Engels and Faucher, explored ideas and problems current in their day: whether industrialization is man-made or decreed by Providence; to what extent the poor are responsible for their own plight; if self-help comprises the best social system and external help is debilitating, or whether a supportive community is necessary for survival; could education cure the evils of poverty, crime, and prostitution.

Similarly fictional texts, like Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, examined some of these ideas, providing narrative solutions to their own plots. In doing so, they created mythic narratives in a process which, as Gillian Beer suggests, "makes endurable the contemplation of irreconcilable contraries." The next chapter will explain this in some detail.

CHAPTER 2 - *MARY BARTON*

One of the most pervasive social myths of the period when *Mary Barton* was written was the myth of progress. By this I mean the idea that the human race is constantly moving forward and that progress, particularly industrialization, must always be eventually beneficial because it is part of God's grand scheme in an ordered universe. This belief is shown in Faucher's comment, quoted in the previous chapter: "I cannot believe that Providence has given to mankind such maleficent institutions." Along with the idea of industrial progress goes that of individual self-improvement and self-help and of the danger of charity debilitating the efforts of the poor to help themselves. The myth of progress has many links to Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

In Gaskell's work, such myths are invoked but often their paradoxical nature is demonstrated. *Mary Barton* invokes the myth of progress in several ways. Mancunian pride in industrial expansion, and a certain romanticism, is expressed in the description of the firm which employs the hero, Jem Wilson: "[Jem] worked with one of the great firms of engineers, who send from out their towns of workshops engines and machinery to the dominions of the Czar and the Sultan."[1] The long conversation, towards the end of *Mary Barton*, between old Mr Carson and the self-taught working man Job Legh, with Jem Wilson as a

[1]Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life*, ed. Stephen Gill, Penguin Classics (1848; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985) 126. All further references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

silent witness, grapples with theories of political economy. Job makes a strong statement of belief in progress, in spite of the conditions he sees around him and which he himself has experienced:

> It's true it was a sore time for the hand-loom weavers when power-looms came in: them new-fangled things make a man's life like a lottery; and yet I'll never misdoubt that power-looms, and railways, and all such-like inventions, are the gifts of God. I have lived long enough, too, to see that it is part of His plan to send suffering to bring out a higher good . . . (457)

Yet the idea that suffering will bring a higher good is undercut by the way in which the narrative convincingly describes how John Barton is led to murder through the personal tragedies and hardship in his own life, and his observation of the same phenomena in the lives of many others. It could be said that the deaths both of Harry Carson and of John Barton lead to the conversion of Mr Carson which, in its turn, will affect the lives of his numerous employees, and this may perhaps be understood as serving the greater good. Gaskell does not pursue the point, however, and it would indeed be difficult to argue for the idea of greater good when poverty and starvation have been so vividly depicted. The degree of suffering seems entirely too great to be redeemed by some nebulous future benefit. Instead, the mythic narrative which emerges from *Mary Barton* carries the conflicting ideas of beneficial progress and the terrible costs in human terms of rapid industrialization in parallel, keeping the problem suspended and unresolved.

Graphic descriptions of the sufferings of the poor in *Mary Barton* present the negative aspects of the myth of

progress. The brief, factual report of the scene which John Barton and George Wilson encounter, on entering the cellar where their workmate is dying of typhoid fever, is one example. It shows a close affinity with contemporary sociological texts, such as those of Engels and Faucher:

> [O]n going into the cellar inhabited by Davenport, the smell was so foetid as almost to knock the two men down. Quickly recovering themselves, as those inured to such things do, they began to penetrate the thick darkness of the place, and to see three or four little children rolling on the damp, nay wet, brick floor, through which the stagnant, filthy moisture of the street oozed up; the fire-place was empty and black; the wife sat on her husband's chair, and cried in the dank loneliness. (98)

Elizabeth Gaskell's recent biographer, Jenny Uglow, gives an extract from a report given to the annual general meeting of the Domestic Home Mission in 1840, which is reminiscent of the description of the Davenports' cellar. That meeting was chaired by William Gaskell. It is also possible, Uglow points out, that William Gaskell, who was fluent in German, could have read Engels' original book, published in German in 1844.[2] Elizabeth Gaskell did not have to look far for examples of the suffering of the poor.

There is, however, an attempt to balance this picture of the horrors of poverty with explanations of the way in which conditions of trade may affect the livelihood of workers. An order is received from a new foreign market, large enough to provide work for all the mills manufacturing that particular product. But the Manchester manufacturers believe that a duplicate order has been given

[2]Jenny Uglow, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Habit of Stories* (London: Faber, 1993) 141.

to a European manufacturing town where there are "no restrictions on food, no taxes on building or machinery" (220-21). The Manchester manufacturers feel in danger of being undercut and losing that market for the future:

> It was clearly their interest to buy cotton as cheaply, and to beat down wages as low as possible. And in the long run the interests of the workmen would have been thereby benefited. . . . But the masters did not choose to make all these facts known. (221)

Again comes the suggestion of future benefit, but the arrogance of the masters and the ignorance of the workmen as to why wages are being cut lead to distrust and alienation. The result is a strike. It is not the strike itself which is perceived as so terrible but the ill feeling engendered between the classes. The narrator comments: "The most deplorable and enduring evil that arose out of the period of commercial depression to which I refer, was this feeling of alienation between the different classes of society" (126). It is part of the myth of progress that all sections of the community ultimately benefit and harmony between classes is presented as being of more immediate importance than the resolution of social problems.

In the quotation given in the previous chapter, from one of Elizabeth Gaskell's letters, that "there are duties connected with the manufacturing system not fully understood as yet, and evils existing in relation to it which may be remedied in some degree, although we as yet do not see how" we see the same refusal to accept that Providence would provide "maleficent institutions" voiced by Faucher. Refusal is expressed, too, in the comment of Faucher's

translator that the manufacturing system must have a "mission" and that to understand that mission "and how it may most speedily and effectively be accomplished, is a task worthy of the intelligent and benevolent mind."[3] These three different voices - of a Unitarian minister's wife, a French social observer, and a Member of the Manchester Athenaeum - all form part of the reformist discourse of the day. Gaskell's words in particular imply the prospect of a future resolution of the problems of industrialization, once society itself has progressed further in understanding. The alienation between classes is rooted in a lack of comprehension.

Progress for society includes progress for the individual in the form of self-improvement and self-help. Although Samuel Smiles' *Self-Help* was not published until 1859, it is based upon a series of lectures given in Leeds in 1845 (three years before the publication of *Mary Barton*). Mutual improvement societies flourished in England in the mid nineteenth century and the opening words of Smiles's book became famous: "Heaven helps those who help themselves." Smiles emphasizes that "Help from without is often enfeebling in its effects, but help from within invariably invigorates."[4] This sentiment is also most marked in the translator's notes to Faucher's book:

> The number and extent of our charitable institutions, and the large amount of indiscriminate relief afforded, is a growing evil, to which the

[3]Faucher vii.

[4]Samuel Smiles, *Self-Help: With Illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance* (1859; London: Murray, 1958) 35.

> attention of our townsmen cannot be too urgently directed. If habits of self-respect, and an honest pride of independence are the safeguard of the working classes, and a barrier against the inroads of pauperism, it will follow that any public institutions which lead them, directly or indirectly, to depend upon the bounty of others in times of poverty and sickness, and which tend to encourage idleness and improvidence, are not really and truly, (as their supporters desire them to be,) public charities - but public evils.[5]

Circumstances are depicted in *Mary Barton*, however, where it is next to impossible for individuals to help themselves. John Barton is, we are told, "a good, steady workman" (60) but even a steady workman is not proof against trade fluctuations. True, the narrator goes on to say that Barton "spent all he got with the confidence (you may also call it improvidence) of one who was willing, and believed himself able, so supply all his wants by his own exertions" (60). Barton's belief in his own capacity to maintain himself is very much in tune with the thinking of the day and relates directly to the ideas of individualism and "self-interest" contained in the *Wealth of Nations*. Several early reviewers did indeed accept the invitation to call Barton's conduct improvident and condemned him for not saving in "good" times.[6] And this was a common attitude at the time. But Barton is portrayed as spending his money on his wife and children and on creating a modestly

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[5]Faucher 58, n26.

[6]See, for example, the following reviews quoted in Robert L. Selig, *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Reference Guide* (Boston, Mass: G.K. Hall, 1977) 6 & 7:
William Rathbone Greg, "Mary Barton," *Edinburgh Review*, LXXXIX (April 1849): 402-53. Reprinted in William Rathbone Greg, *The Mistaken Aims and Attainable Ideals of the Artisan Class* (London: Trübner, 1876) 111-73.
W.E., "Mary Barton,. . ." *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* (London), LI (April 1849): 48-63.

comfortable home. None of the working class characters in the novel are depicted as at all extravagant. *Mary Barton* demonstrates that, even in the best of times for millhands, the little that a provident man could save would not be sufficient to keep himself and his family through weeks, let alone months, of unemployment. Engels, too, has a point to make on this subject:

> The English bourgeoisie is violently scandalised at the extravagant living of the workers when wages are high; yet it is not only very natural but very sensible of them to enjoy life when they can, instead of laying up treasures which are of no lasting use to them.[7]

Engels appears to accept the charge of improvidence and therefore to agree with the critics that this is how the workers act. His point is that the poor should not be *expected* to be provident: Gaskell's that they are not *able* to be provident. The individualistic, "self-help" component of the myth of progress is challenged in *Mary Barton* by an older idea of community (itself part of the Christian myth). The survival of many of the characters depends, not upon self-help, but upon help from friends and neighbours.

Faucher's scheme for profit sharing by the workers (described in the last chapter) has much in common with the ideas attributed to the reformed Mr Carson at the end of *Mary Barton* that:

> the interests of one were the interests of all . . . hence it was most desirable to have educated workers, capable of judging, not mere machines of ignorant men; and to have them bound to their

[7]Engels 117.

> employers by the ties of respect and affection,
> not by mere money bargains alone . . . (460)

Gaskell does not, however, go so far as to suggest profit-sharing. The main thrust of the novel is clearly stated by the narrator in discussing the causes of the strike: "Distrust each other as they may, the employers and the employed must rise or fall together" (221). And it is not the inequality of their positions in life which causes most of the workers' hostility towards the masters. In the words of Job Legh: "[W]hat we all feel sharpest is the want of inclination to try and help the evils which come like blights at times over the manufacturing places" (458).

With this comment, Job Legh is drawing on the Christian myth, which intersects with the myth of progress at many points. The Christian myth includes the idea that social problems can be solved through individual taking of responsibility for one's neighbour, that it is, in fact, the duty of both individuals and classes to take responsibility for one another. Other ideas which the Christian myth encompasses are the common humanity of rich and poor; that suffering on earth will be rewarded in Heaven; that redemption is possible; and that stations in life are divinely ordered. The last is epitomized in the words of Mrs Alexander's famous hymn, "All Things Bright and Beautiful" (1848): "The rich man in his castle, The poor man at his gate, God made them, high or lowly, and order'd their estate." This comforting idea of a place for everyone and everyone in his or her place in the social order was increasingly being challenged through the disruptions brought about by industrialization.

Part of the social programme of Christian denominations of all kinds was the reformation of existing social evils:

> The conviction that 'works,' inspired by Christian love, could regenerate English society was shared by evangelicals of all denominations and made possible the alliance of middle-class Anglicans and nonconformists in the bid to rescue those otherwise condemned to eternal damnation.[8]

Unitarians were particularly susceptible to the link between belief and practice, though they kept their distance from the more evangelical groups, disliking the appeal of such groups to the emotions rather than to reason. Social problem novels such as *Mary Barton* were, however, quite in accord with the Unitarian ethic of the perfectability of mankind and of society.

It has been suggested that the popularity of social problem novels in the mid nineteenth century resulted from a loss of providential plots. Peter Brooks sees this loss as part of a "large process of secularization."[9] At the time *Mary Barton* was written, however, the process did not involve rejection of religious belief, only a change from the idea of a sacred masterplan, administered by providence, in favour of the duty of human responsibility. Some vestiges of the providential plot remain in the Christian myth drawn on in *Mary Barton* in the numerous deaths which occur, particularly the deaths of John Barton and Esther, who are buried together in a grave which is

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[8]Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780-1850* (London: Hutchinson Education, 1987) 95.

[9]Brooks, *Reading for the Plot*, 6.

"without name, or initial, or date" (465). The two sinners, who contributed to their own premature deaths, become anonymous in death but with a promise of forgiveness inscribed upon their tombstone: "For He will not always chide, neither will He keep his anger for ever" - Psalm 103, v.9 (465). The hope of redemption is apparent in the inscription and in the naming of Mary's son, Johnnie, after his grandfather. Unitarians believed in the possibility of redemption in this life, a belief exemplified in the novel by old Mr Carson.

There is, however, a tension between the assertion of the possibility of social improvement and the sense of the irredeemability of the situation of men like John Barton. This is evident in the change in style of *Mary Barton*, which some critics have seen as the failure of the novel. Beginning as a realistic story of the daily lives and conditions of the Manchester poor, *Mary Barton* seems to undergo a change in the middle, from realism to melodrama. The meeting of the conspirators, John Barton's assassination of Harry Carson, the scene at Barton's deathbed and Mr Carson's conversion could well be described as "melodramatic," if we refer the term back, as does Peter Brooks, "from adjective to substantive:"

> The connotations of the word ["melodrama"] are probably similar for us all. They include: the indulgence of strong emotionalism; moral polarization and schematization; extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good and final reward of virtue; inflated and extravagant expression; dark plottings, suspense, breathtaking peripety.[10]

[10]Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and*

Not all of these occur in *Mary Barton*, of course, but several do make their appearance, including the "dark plottings" and "indulgence of strong emotionalism". The scene where the murderer is chosen by lot, in flickering gas light, after the swearing of an oath, has all the theatricality of melodrama. Each of the conspirators goes his own way in silence:

> He who had drawn the marked paper had drawn the lot of the assassin! and he had sworn to act according to his drawing! But no one save God and his own conscience knew who was the appointed murderer! (242)

So, too, the narrator's theatrical description of John Barton's agony of remorse stands in complete contrast, in terms of style, to the pragmatic tone of the earlier descriptions of small domestic arrangements: "Oh blasting thought! Oh miserable remembrance! He had forfeited all right to bind up his brother's wounds" (435).

The melodramatic elements of *Mary Barton* include not only the style of writing, but the sequence of events. The assassination of Harry Carson; Mary's finding of the Valentine card and realization of her father's guilt; the appearance of Aunt Esther at dusk and Mary's mistaking her for her dead mother; Mary's pursuit of Will Wilson down the Mersey by sail boat; the courtroom drama and Mary's collapse with brain fever, together provide an excitement and movement which vividly bring to life the novel's social concerns of alienation, poverty, unemployment,

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the Mode of Excess (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 11-12.

prostitution, and the difficulties encountered by the poor in obtaining justice.

In his discussion of the "melodramatic imagination," Brooks does not write of melodrama as a genre "but rather melodrama as a mode of conception and expression, as a certain fictional system for making sense of experience, as a semantic field of force."[11] The question at issue is basically - what can be achieved by melodrama which cannot be achieved by realism? To quote Brooks once more: "lurid and melodramatic fiction opens up social concerns, makes them imaginatively available" and this can be done with greater effect than could be achieved by more sober and "realistic" writing and plots.[12] Social tensions are played out through melodrama and problems which concern society at large are made more immediate and comprehensible when they are illustrated at a personal level. Melodrama enables the gap between the general and personal to be bridged. The scenes just prior to, and at, John Barton's deathbed, with Barton crushed by guilt and remorse, Mr Carson distracted by grief and obsessed with the desire for revenge, and the final reconciliation where Barton dies in Carson's arms, serve to provide a symbolic resolution to at least one of the problems of industrialization: the problem of alienation between classes. Master and worker are reconciled through changes of heart brought about by the experience of overpowering emotions. The change from

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[11] Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination* xiii.

[12] Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* 163.

realism in the earlier part of *Mary Barton* to the "fantasy" of melodrama enables the author to pose a utopian solution to an intractable contemporary social problem. Christian charity and forgiveness on all sides is offered as an answer to industrial and social tensions. The parallel seems to be drawn: if an individual may be redeemed, so may society. This aspect of the Christian myth, upon which *Mary Barton* draws, is exemplified by a statement of Faucher's:

> But complete happiness - the happiness of the individual, in the bosom of the family, and of the family in the bosom of society, can only be attained by a close and intimate association between the inferiors and the superiors.[13]

The resultant mythic narrative of *Mary Barton* contains both the idea that loving kindness between classes will resolve social tensions and the contrary idea, which is clearly shown in the text, that the massive change of heart required on all sides is in defiance of human nature. Such a change may perhaps be hoped for, but never confidently expected, because of the uncertainty which existed in Victorian society about the essence of human nature, particularly that exemplified by the lower classes.

Uncertainty about the true essence of human nature underlies the prevailing myth of scientism. Middle-class fears of industrial unrest and concern about the bitterness of feelings between classes owe some of their potency to the perception of the working class as "other" and not perhaps quite human. The optimistic aspects of scientism -

[13]Faucher 126.

medical discoveries in the treatment of disease, great advances in engineering which enabled water and sewerage reticulation, mechanical inventions designed to ease the load of human labour - are shadowed by the myth of Frankenstein, the fear that increasing knowledge and experimentation could lead not to something beneficial but to something monstrous.

In one of the more didactic passages in *Mary Barton* (219-223), the narrator tries to explain the resentment felt by the poor against the upper classes. Much is attributed to a lack of education of the working class, seen as a failure of duty on the part of the upper classes. However, in spite of the novel's sincere compassion for the poor, there is also an apprehension about their potential for violence, echoed by an anonymous reviewer in the *Morning Post* of 24 November 1848: "[E]nlightenment on the part of employers would . . . help allay dangerous working-class views".[14] The novel treats the growing power of trade unions with anxiety:

> Combination is an awful power. It is like the equally mighty agency of steam; capable of almost unlimited good or evil. But to obtain a blessing on its labours, it must work under the direction of a high and intelligent will; incapable of being misled by passion, or excitement. The will of the operatives had not been guided to the calmness of wisdom. (223)

The hope is that education will prevent the working class from being misled by agitators. The weavers are described as "these poor fellows, whose tastes had been left to

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[14]Anon, "Literature, *Mary Barton*,. . ." *Morning Post* (London: 24 November 1848): 6. Quoted in Selig 2-3.

educate themselves into a liking for tobacco, beer, and similar gratifications . . ." (236).

This aspect of *Mary Barton* needs to be seen in the context of its time of writing, when there was great social unrest throughout Europe, and revolutions had already occurred and still seemed a real possibility. Elizabeth Gaskell taps the myth of scientism to evoke the potent image of Frankenstein's monster. Making the common mistake of confusing Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein with his creation, she has her narrator observe that:

> The actions of the uneducated seem to me typified in those of Frankenstein, that monster of many human qualities, ungifted with a soul, a knowledge of the difference between good and evil. (219-220)

This image is continued in the query: "Why have we made them what they are; a powerful monster, yet without the inner means for peace and happiness?" (220). *Mary Barton* stresses the idea that women and men of all classes are members of one human family, yet such comments betray a viewpoint which regards the working class as "other." Chris Baldick makes the point that, in contemporary usage, monstrosity was often understood to be moral rather than physical:

> In modern usage 'monster' means something frighteningly unnatural or of huge dimensions. But in earlier usages, which persist into the nineteenth century, the word carries further connotations essential to the development of the Frankenstein myth, the essence of which is that they are not physiological but moral in their reference.[15]

[15]Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-century Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 10.

Gaskell's ambivalence towards the working class may be detected in the characters of John Barton and Job Legh. Her admiration for Samuel Bamford, working class poet and activist, has already been mentioned. In *Mary Barton*, the character of Bamford appears to have been used, but split into two parts. Job Legh represents the highly intelligent, self-educated working man who has a respect for learning and does not concern himself with politics. John Barton represents the politically active side of the character, fervent but misguided. The connection of both to Bamford is suggested by the fact that Job Legh reads aloud Bamford's poem "God Help the Poor," which so moves John Barton that he asks Mary to copy out the poem for him. Mary copies the poem onto the fateful Valentine card, later used as gun wadding, which incriminates Barton in the murder of Harry Carson. That which could become monstrous in the working class character is detached and isolated in John Barton.

And yet one of the strongest themes in *Mary Barton*, and certainly part of the Christian myth, is the common humanity of rich and poor. Of course, the poor had always existed but, as Gertrude Himmelfarb comments:

> What was new, or was perceived to be new, was the separation of the poor from the rest of society, as if their poverty disqualified them from membership in the larger human community, the one nation of Englishmen.[16]

This was the phenomenon of the "two nations" and Gaskell works hard to counteract this perception. Although much of

[16]Himmelfarb 508.

Mary Barton focuses on the social problems of the poor, there are episodes which depict working class life very positively and show that appreciation of nature and pleasure in the society of friends are not confined by class boundaries. The idyllic opening of *Mary Barton*, depicting family groups enjoying the countryside on a spring afternoon, is immediately followed by a tea party. John Barton's impromptu gesture of inviting the Wilson family to tea necessitates some planning, and the minute description of arrangements paints a vivid picture of neighbourliness and goodwill. The tea tray, normally prized more for ornament than utility, acquires a symbolic value later in the story, when it is pawned in a time of desperate poverty, for it represents happiness and hospitality:

> On [the table], resting against the wall, was a bright green japanned tea-tray, having a couple of scarlet lovers embracing in the middle. The fire-light danced merrily on this, and . . . it gave a richness of colouring to that side of the room. (50)

After "a long whispering, and chinking of money, to which Mr and Mrs Wilson were too polite to attend; knowing, as they did full well, that it all related to the preparations for hospitality" (50), Mary is sent to buy ham and eggs: an egg each and two pounds of ham. Such expenditure displays an almost reckless generosity by the Bartons, indicating not a lack of working class thrift but the strength of the ethic of hospitality. Here is Faucher's image of complete happiness: the individual happy within the family and the poor family, here not excluded, but in the bosom of society.

It is the home which is at the centre of this demonstration of the shared qualities of rich and poor, and on the home - the private, domestic sphere - is focused the myth of the Angel in the House. The phrase is taken from the title of Coventry Patmore's series of poems, published from 1854-63, which celebrate middle-class domesticity and both idealize and infantilize women. The relationship between men and women is expressed as follows:

> He's never young nor ripe; she grows
> More infantine, auroral, mild,
> And still the more she lives and knows
> The lovelier she's express'd a child.[17]

Woman is, in the name of protection, to be confined to the private sphere of the home, protected from knowledge which might sully her innocence. Innocence is generally equated with ignorance: "How wise in all she ought to know,/How ignorant of all beside!"[18] Women are protected from entry into the public sphere of men, via profession or trade. The home is to be the sanctuary for the home-coming male, and the provision of comfort and order in the home one of woman's highest accomplishments. Her nurturing role of wife and mother is to supply her with total fulfilment.

Women were frequently told what power they exerted through their influence in the home on husbands and children. Although Coventry Patmore's title is most often used to describe such nineteenth-century attitudes towards women, he was one of many such writers, and certainly not

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[17]Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House together with The Victories of Love* (1854-63; London: Routledge, 1905) 57.

[18]Patmore 122.

the first to record these prevailing social mores. Books of advice for women proliferated, due to the new and uncertain status of the bourgeoisie. Two of the most famous advisers of women were Mrs Sandford and Mrs Ellis. The former advises that: "Domestic life is the chief sphere of [woman's] influence; and domestic comfort is the greatest benefit she confers upon society;" "A really sensible woman feels her dependence. She does what she can; but she is conscious of her inferiority, and therefore grateful for support;" and the final *coup de grace* for any female ambition outside this sphere:

> St. Paul knew what was best for woman when he advised her to be domestic. He knew that home was her safest place; home her appropriate station. He knew especially the dangers to which young women are exposed, when, under any pretence, they fly from home. There is composure at home; there is something sedative in the duties which home involves. It affords security not only from the world, but from delusions and errors of every kind.[19]

The use of the word "sedative" is significant. The ideal state advocated for women seems to have been very similar to that of someone taking tranquillizers. Women should be above all calm, quiet, and contained, as though it is feared that any heightening of female perceptions or quickening of female intelligence might lead to a dangerous outbreak of feeling - or even action. (It might be remarked that Elizabeth Gaskell does not seem to have found her household duties in the least sedative, living as she did in an energetic whirl of domestic and social activity.)

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[19]Mrs John Sandford, *Woman, in Her Social and Domestic Character* 3rd ed. (London: Longman, 1833) 2, 14, & 221-22.

Sarah Stickney Ellis, a prolific author of books of advice for women, sees the development of any intellectual talents in a woman as only justified in order to provide better companionship for her husband. Quietness, calm, and a proper acceptance of the inferiority of her status are a woman's lot. Mrs Ellis asserts that "silence in general, and smooth speech when language must be used, are ranked by most men amongst the highest excellencies of the female character." She admits, however, that there are some unhappy situations on which she cannot advise. When a woman finds herself married to a man who is all too obviously deficient in character and intelligence, Mrs Ellis implies that stoicism is the only answer to such a "delicate and trying" predicament:

> if he should be absolutely silly, it would require more skill than the writer of these pages can boast, to know what mode of treating him to recommend; for build him up as you will before company, and much may be done in this way by the exercise of delicacy and tact, a truly grovelling man will sink again, and there is no help for it.[20]

The Angel in the House myth is essentially a middle-class myth, for it proposes an ideal which is difficult for a poor working class family to attain. Gaskell's strong belief in the importance of the home is shown in *Mary Barton*, but alongside this are revealed the conditions which exclude the poor from emulating the myth. While John Barton is in work and earning a reasonable wage the home is cheerful and comfortable, "almost crammed with furniture

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[20]Mrs Ellis, *The Wives of England, their Relative Duties, Domestic Influence, & Social Obligations* (London: Fisher, 1843) 92 & 115.

(sure sign of good times among the mills)" (50). But even in good times, unmarried working-class women must work. There are three options open to Mary: domestic service, factory work, or dressmaking. John Barton dislikes the idea of domestic service, as it would mean Mary's leaving home, and because he regards servants as slaves of the rich. Mary feels that servants "must often drudge and be dirty" while a dressmaker's apprentice must be "always dressed with a certain regard to appearance" (62). Mary's views on factory work are not stated but John Barton is set against it, after his experience with Esther. The irony of Barton's dislike of factory work for girls is that it is based upon his fear that the relatively high wages provide a harmful independence, enabling girls to waste their money on clothes and exposing them to the attention of predatory males. But the dressmaking trade is much more likely to expose girls to this type of danger, as is demonstrated in both *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*. Mary's motives for choosing dressmaking are closely involved with her ambition to become a lady. The perceived gentility of dressmaking and the opportunities it may afford to achieve her ambition offer sufficient compensation for the poor pay. Father and daughter are therefore agreed as to the desirability of Mary's being apprenticed to a dressmaker, though for very different reasons.

Factory work offered girls the chance of a measure of independence and this was often perceived, as by John Barton, as highly dangerous. The popular idea of mill girls could not be further from that of the Angel in the House. As Davidoff and Hall comment:

> Intense fears surrounded the 'impertinent' independent mill girl who refused the paternalistic discipline of domestic service or even the oversight of the parental home, and who might also, it was felt, refuse to fit the role of respectable working-man's wife.[21]

Worse was the fact that many married women worked in the factories. Engels sees the employment of married women as breaking up the family and even worse yet is the situation where the wife has work but the husband is unemployed. It was not unusual for there to be work for women and children but not for men, where work required the flexibility of smaller fingers and no great muscular strength. Engels reports:

> In many cases the family is not wholly dissolved by the employment of the wife, but turned upside down. The wife supports the family, the husband sits at home, tends the children, sweeps the room and cooks. This case happens very frequently; in Manchester alone, many hundreds such men could be cited, condemned to domestic occupations. It is easy to imagine the wrath aroused among the working-men by this reversal of all relations within the family, while other social conditions remain unchanged.[22]

Such a situation - a man "condemned" to the domesticity prescribed for women - was a direct challenge to the Angel in the House myth and must have been felt as repugnant by most Victorians. Engels himself takes a far less conventional view, asserting that if the rule of the wife over the husband is "inhuman," so must the rule of the husband over the wife have been. Family ties, he suggests, are not necessarily of affection but of private interest.

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[21] Davidoff & Hall 275.

[22] Engels 144.

Engels, like other commentators, points out that girls who have worked in the factories since they were children have no opportunity to learn domestic work and have no idea how to manage their households or children when the time comes.[23]

The long hours which Mary works as an apprentice contribute to the beginning of John Barton's decline:

> Barton still attended his club, and was an active member of a trades' union; indeed, more frequently than ever, since the time of Mary's return in the evening was so uncertain; and, as she occasionally, in very busy times, remained all night (64).

Had his home been more welcoming, it is implied, Barton might never have become so deeply involved in trade union business, leading to the hardening of his "misguided" political notions and subsequently to the deed of murder. Barton's further degeneration, after he loses his job, is mirrored in the deterioration of the home. Gradually all the luxuries, epitomized by the japan lacquer tray described in the early scene of the tea party, are pawned: "The smart tea-tray, and tea-caddy, long and carefully kept, went for bread . . . Then the blankets went, for it was summer time, and they could spare them" (159). Piece by piece, the house is denuded of everything that made it homely and pleasant, until it is in stark contrast to the happy colourful setting of the tea party. The lacquer tray, no doubt shoddy and vulgar to Elizabeth Gaskell's more affluent readers, stands as a token to stir their compassion: so small and cheap an item to represent luxury,

[23]Engels 146 & 147.

yet creating such a sense of deprivation and poverty by its absence. The contrast between the scene of good fellowship and homely hospitality and the later cold, dingy and comfortless house, occupied by the gaunt and guilt-ridden John Barton, makes its own statement.

Dressmaking, for all its comparative gentility, is shown in *Mary Barton* to be a form of slave labour, and just as subject to the fluctuations of demand as factory work. Not only working-class women but some middle-class women tried to earn a living by sewing. Mary Lamb, the sister of Charles Lamb, was a mantua-maker who, in a fit of temporary insanity in 1796, stabbed and killed her mother. Mary, after a short period of incarceration, was released into the custody of her brother but she still suffered occasional periods of mental instability for the rest of her life. In 1815, Mary Lamb wrote an article entitled "On Needlework," published in the *British Ladies' Magazine*, under the pseudonym "Sempronia." The article appeals to affluent women not to take employment from the truly needy by doing their own needlework at home, particularly plain sewing.[24] Elizabeth Gaskell was herself involved in a project to provide sewing work for needy seamstresses. In her biography, Jenny Uglow quotes a letter from Geraldine Jewsbury to Jane Carlyle, expressing relief at no longer feeling obliged to make her own petticoats: "'Mary Barton'

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[24]For a comprehensive discussion of the social and psychological implications of the article see Jane Aaron, "'On Needle-Work:' Protest and Contradiction in Mary Lamb's Essay," *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988) 167-84.

has begged me out of charity to give them her for one of her 'protegees' to make, whom she wants to find work for!"[25] It is likely that a heroine working as a dressmaker would be viewed more sympathetically by middle-class readers, than a heroine who was a mill-girl.

However, in the character of Alice Wilson, Gaskell does manage to create a working-class version of the Angel in the House myth. Alice has never married, although she has brought up her orphaned nephew. (Many of Elizabeth Gaskell's stories contain single women who adopt, or care for, children.) Alice is a strong, self-supporting woman, who has spent a life-time nurturing others. She gathers herbs and concocts medicines for the sick. She has made the change from rural to urban life, bringing the best of the old ways with her and perpetuating the values of a vanishing way of life. Through Alice, the novel shows an awareness of historical change from a rural to an urban/industrial economy, as her reminiscences of a happy country childhood and necessary move to the city for work underline. Gaskell shows that poverty exists both in the country and the town. The novel does not make a comparison between a past rustic golden age and present harsh conditions in the slums. Although *Mary Barton* opens with a type of pastoral idyll - some of the poor at least have found open country near the city to enjoy, in spite of Faucher's comment on the lack of public open space - the

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[25]Geraldine Jewsbury to Jane Carlyle, n.d. [1849], *Selections from the Letters of Geraldine Endsor Jewsbury to Jane Welsh Carlyle*, ed. Mrs Alexander Ireland (London: 1892) 342. Quoted in Uglow 320 and 651 note 42.

narrator comments of Mrs Barton that, while her face is beautiful, she has "somewhat of the deficiency of sense in her countenance, which is likewise characteristic of the rural inhabitants in comparison with the natives of the manufacturing towns" (41-42).

Alice Wilson might be seen to represent the suggestion that, given the right circumstances, a type of the Angel in the House can be found even amongst the very poor. She also represents, however, the position of women in her society. Although, as a single, self-supporting working woman, she has a measure of independence, she is still disempowered by poverty and lack of education. She contrives to live with moderate success within the existing patriarchal and class systems but she is still clearly a victim of the inequities built into those systems.

Mary Barton herself is allowed a greater degree of autonomy than later Gaskell heroines. She administers the family finances from the time her mother dies, when Mary is thirteen, and is trusted by her father to manage her life sensibly. Mary briefly acts like a male hero in her pursuit of Will Wilson, first by train to Liverpool and then by boat down the Mersey, but by this time the book has gone into melodramatic mode and the sense of realism is lost. The treatment of Mary seems to be offering a solution to the position of women only through fantasy. By the end of the novel it seems, though, that Mary will at last be fitted to the Angel in the House myth. She has become wise enough to reject Harry Carson "not beloved, but favoured by fancy" in favour of the honest love of Jem Wilson. She has been manipulated by her court appearance

into a position where modesty must be put aside and she must declare her love. Jem is steady, hardworking and of her own class. He is the middle-class conception of the ideal working man and Mary has become fitted to be the Angel in his house. The mythic narrative carries three separate ideas in parallel regarding the Angel in the House myth: firstly, the myth itself as represented by Mary at the end of the story; secondly, the impossibility for the poor of participating in the myth; and, thirdly, an adaptation of the myth to working class circumstances.

In its conclusion, *Mary Barton* taps one of the strongest social myths of the time - that is the myth of emigration. The idea of a better alternative life to be had in other lands where fortunes could be made, particularly by those who had no hope of doing so in Britain, not only constituted a peculiarly potent myth but also suggested possible narrative solutions. Many novels of the time featured emigration in one form or another, for example: Magwitch, of *Great Expectations*, makes a fortune in Australia after his deportation; in *David Copperfield*, the Micawbers set sail with high hopes for Australia; and Kingsley's Alton Locke sets out for the New World at the end of the novel (though dying before he reaches it). The myth of emigration has most power in particular social and historical circumstances. In the mid nineteenth century, at a time of rapid social change, the colonies and the New World offered opportunities to the adventurous and especially to those held back by Britain's rigid class system. Faucher comments on the way in which "the manufacturers of Great Britain acquire great fortunes" but

their workmen "must cross the Atlantic, and establish themselves at the outposts of civilization; in the Canadas, the United States, New Zealand, or Australia" to make their fortunes.[26]

Emigrants were desperately needed in the newer countries both simply to supply labour shortages and to bring with them their trade skills. Those who could teach others were particularly in demand. Jem's job as an instrument maker to an agricultural college in Canada, with house and land included, sounds an emigrant's dream. The description of Mary and Jem's home in the New World must have touched a chord in many a working-class reader's (or listener's) imagination:

> I see a long low wooden house, with room enough, and to spare. The old primeval trees are felled and gone for many a mile around; one alone remains to overshadow the gable-end of the cottage. There is a garden around the dwelling, and far beyond that stretches an orchard. The glory of the Indian summer is over all, making the heart leap at the sight of its gorgeous beauty (465).

Elizabeth Gaskell has often been accused of evasion in the ending of *Mary Barton*, of leaving unresolved the social problems introduced in the novel. Deirdre David comments that much is (unfairly) expected of the writers of industrial novels:

> Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell have been criticised for not providing remedies for the problems they present, and the perfect industrial novel, we are led to believe, is one in which we find both the logical exposition of a social problem and its feasible resolution.[27]

[26] Faucher 5-6.

[27] David 6.

Gaskell honestly presents the problems of poverty and alienation as she has observed them, and provides a narrative solution for her characters. It is not the author's responsibility to produce a blue-print for setting the world to rights. The fact that the main characters in *Mary Barton* can only escape their problems through death or emigration increases the novel's pathos by emphasizing the intractable nature of the problems they face. There are no quick and easy social solutions.

The mythic narrative which emerges from *Mary Barton* enables the contradictions within prevailing social myths to be held in suspension, without solution. The myth of progress, with its belief in individualism, self-help, and social benefit is paralleled by ideas of community support, the importance of mutual aid, and the evil effects of industrialization on the health and well-being of many. The Christian myth contains many ideas similar to the myth of progress and also concepts of personal and social redemption through changes of heart. But the frailty of human nature and fears of working class "monstrosity" interimpose themselves between Mr Carson's hope for ideal class relations and its fulfilment. Like the Christian myth, the Angel in the House myth contains tensions between the ideal and the actual. It relies on a level of income which excludes the poorest classes and also on the oppression and containment of women through their idealization. The myth of scientism contains both admiration for new inventions and discoveries and fear that too much knowledge may be dangerous and productive of monsters. Even the emigration myth has its contradictory

aspects, for if the best of the working classes emigrate (and Mary and Jem could be so described) who will remain to help with the social problems which Britain suffers - to build the New Jerusalem? It could be said that the novel offers a resolution in terms of Mary and Jem's union and emigration, but so honestly does Gaskell depict social conditions in *Mary Barton*, that the balance of the mythic narrative is at times threatened and closure, in the form of aesthetic cohesion, is not as strong as it might be.

In her second industrial novel, *North and South*, Elizabeth Gaskell taps many of the same myths, but achieves a surer balance in the mythic narrative. The process will be described in comparison with a recent novel, David Lodge's *Nice Work*, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3 - *NORTH AND SOUTH* AND *NICE WORK*

The social problems of the industrialized North of England do not occupy quite so prominent a position in *North and South* (1855)[1] as in *Mary Barton* (1848). The narrative viewpoint of *North and South* is, for the most part, that of the middle-class outsider, Margaret Hale, and problems are presented both from the employers' and the workers' perspectives. Generally, *Mary Barton* put only the workers' side of the question: but *North and South* puts both. Where *Mary Barton* focused upon Manchester, *North and South* is far more ambitious in its scope, moving between London, the southern village of Helstone, and Milton Northern (Manchester). *North and South* does, however, draw on many of the same myths as *Mary Barton*.

The "two nations" theme of *Mary Barton* takes on far greater complexity in *North and South*, as intersecting dichotomies are shown to divide British society. Not only is there a class division across society between rich and poor, but a social division of prejudice between those of similar prosperity engaged in the professions and in trade. There is also the geographical division of the title, between the North and South of England. In *North and South*, these last two sets of divisions overlap and blend.

The marked social division existing between those in trade and in professions is depicted early in *North and*

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[1]Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson, World's Classics (1855; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1982). All references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text. To avoid ambiguity when giving references for quotations, I preface page numbers with "*NS*" for *North and South* or "*NW*" for *Nice Work*.

South, through Margaret Hale's snobbish disdain for the pretensions of people engaged in trade - "shoppy people." To Mrs Hale's injunction not to be so fastidious, she responds:

> No! I call mine a very comprehensive taste; I like all people whose occupations have to do with land; I like soldiers and sailors, and the three learned professions, as they call them. I'm sure you don't want me to admire butchers and bakers, and candlestick-makers, do you, mamma? (*NS* 19)

To Margaret, education is a large component of gentility - for men at least. Her reaction on learning that her father is to tutor John Thornton is: "What in the world do manufacturers want with the classics, or literature, or the accomplishments of a gentleman?" (*NS* 39). This division has equal prominence in the novel with that between rich and poor.

At first, Margaret compares the grime and fogs of Milton, its hurrying crowds and what seems to her its aggressive materialism, with the rustic beauty of the village of Helstone, her "village in a poem" (*NS* 12). But although many of her early comparisons between the industrial North and the rural South of England favour the South, this is not true on all occasions. The rural workers of the South of England are compared very unfavourably with the industrial workers of the North. Margaret revises her opinions during the course of *North and South* and earnestly advises Nicholas Higgins not to move to the South to look for work. Where she once assumed contentment among the rural poor, in contrast to the perceived discontent of the mill workers, Margaret now

recognizes apathy. She describes such labourers to Higgins:

> The hard spade-work robs their brain of life; the sameness of their toil deadens their imagination; they don't care to meet to talk over thoughts and speculations, even of the weakest, wildest kind, after their work is done; they go home brutishly tired, poor creatures! caring for nothing but food and rest. (*NS* 306)

Tired as they may be after their day's work, the northern workers still have the energy to enjoy ideas, seek education, or at the very least to pursue some social activity: "The workman was not to be found after the day's work was done; he had gone away to some lecture, or some club, or some beer-shop, according to his degree of character" (*NS* 342).

The two nations theme also dominates David Lodge's novel *Nice Work*,[2] which is set over a century later, in the Britain of the 1980s. Lodge writes of a period when there was an emerging sense of "two nations," of increasing divisions in British society when, it seems, attempts were being made to reverse political development since the nineteenth century. His novel is an attempt, therefore, to produce a "condition-of-England" novel for the 1980s, that also reflects on its predecessor, the social problem novel of the nineteenth century. Lodge creates a forceful parallel between the world of Elizabeth Gaskell's industrial novels and the world of *Nice Work*. His novel is included here because of the light it throws upon aspects

[2]David Lodge, *Nice Work* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1989). All further references are to this edition.

of Gaskell's *North and South*, such as the novel's use of myth and discourse on gender. *Nice Work* closely imitates the plot of *North and South* yet, particularly in its ending, presents a mirror image which, through reversal, highlights some of the assumptions and values of *North and South*. By transferring nineteenth-century beliefs into the twentieth century, Lodge deconstructs those beliefs. Throughout *Nice Work*, the author quotes from, and refers to, many condition-of-England novels, such as *Sybil*, *Hard Times*, *Shirley*, *Felix Holt*, *Alton Locke*, and Gaskell's own *Mary Barton*, as well as *North and South*. All but one of the epigraphs he uses come from such novels. The exception is the quotation from Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, which itself serves as an epigraph to George Eliot's *Felix Holt the Radical*. Obviously, *Nice Work* is intended to comment on the contemporary condition of England, employing the novel as a form of social analysis. But the striking resemblances in plot between *Nice Work* and *North and South* make it clear that Lodge is not only mimicking the genre, but creating a deliberate parallel.

Much has changed materially from mid nineteenth-century Britain to the Britain of the 1980s, yet some of the philosophies - even some of the prevailing myths - remain surprisingly the same. In Lodge's Britain Thatcherism reigns, a set of policies derived from a tradition of political and economic individualism that can be traced back to Adam Smith. Thatcherite policies included: free markets, with minimal government intervention and the encouragement of individual enterprise; rigid control of public spending and

restriction of welfare benefits to those truly "in need"; anti-unionism and the rejection of any commitment to full employment; and a distrust of government by consensus. Such policies contain a revision of any idea of "one nation." One of Margaret Thatcher's most famous and often quoted remarks, made in an interview published by *Woman's Own* 31 October 1987, was: "There is no such thing as society; there are only individuals, and families."[3] The value of the British welfare state, with roots reaching back to the mid nineteenth century, was being called into question. Many of the contributions to the discourse of political economy in Britain in the 1980s would have been quite familiar to a nineteenth-century observer. Arguments both for and against Thatcherism echo those being put forward in the last century. As A.H. Halsey observes:

> The . . . truth is that the debate is ancient. Mrs Thatcher is no more modern than Harriet Martineau. The arguments are fundamentally the same as those which surrounded the 1834 Poor Law. Thomas Malthus, Alex [sic] de Tocqueville, Karl Marx, the Chartists and the political economists of *laissez faire* are still alive and well. The ideas are the same; only the circumstances change.[4]

Some of the results of Thatcherism are bleakly depicted by David Lodge. In *Mary Barton*, the social division between the "two nations" of rich and poor is described, while *North and South* depicts this plus other divisions in society. Lodge's *Nice Work* features more

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[3]Quoted in Hugo Young, *One of Us: A Biography of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Macmillan, 1989) 490.

[4]A.H. Halsey, "A Sociologist's View of Thatcherism," *Thatcherism*, ed. Robert Skidelsky (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989) 174.

divisions than either of the Gaskell novels, not only social but racial. The "two nations" of *Nice Work* might be seen as the employed and the unemployed, based on the same geographical distinctions as Gaskell's novel, the North being identified with unemployment, the South with greater prosperity. North and South have become separate nations. The gulf between trade and profession in *North and South* becomes that between industry and the universities in *Nice Work*. In *North and South* the population is depicted as largely homogeneous, the only "foreigners" who feature to any extent being the Irish labourers. But in *Nice Work*, Pringle's has a labour force composed of many races and creeds.

With the lack of spending on infrastructure and the degeneration of the manufacturing Midlands and North of England into "the rust belt", urban decay is increasingly obvious in *Nice Work*. In an industrial area of Rummidge, Robyn Penrose approaches Pringle's factory by

> a tortuous route through streets lined with factories and warehouses, many of them closed down, some displaying "For Sale" or "For Lease" signs on them, some derelict beyond the hope of restoration, with snow blowing through their smashed windows. There was not a soul to be seen on the pavements. (*NW* 68)

The decline is not only industrial. Residential areas have suffered, too. Ebury Street, where Vic Wilcox's father lives, is described as follows:

> Decay had set in at each end of the street, as if the molars had been the first to go in a row of teeth, and was creeping slowly towards the middle, where a few of the long-term residents, like [Vic's] father, still remained stubbornly rooted. Some of the houses were squats, some were boarded up, and others were occupied by poor immigrants. (*NW* 118)

In *North and South*, British industry has its ups and downs but Britain is unquestionably the world's leading industrial nation. Confidence in the future of British industry is apparent in many of John Thornton's speeches, and not even the failure of his own business negates the novel's overall mood of faith in progress. By the time of David Lodge's novel, it is suggested that Britain is struggling for survival as a manufacturing economy. Other nations such as Germany, Italy, and the USA are all producing superior goods. Robyn's parents buy foreign cars because of the fabled unreliability of British makes - an attitude which infuriates Vic, who maintains that British standards of quality control have improved immensely over the last few years (*NW* 101-102). But Vic's voice appears to be crying in the wilderness in this case, as he is forced to buy the new factory machinery he needs from Germany.

The two novels can also be compared in generic terms, where Gaskell combines the industrial novel and the novel of religious doubt, Lodge combines the industrial novel with the campus novel. The worlds of industry and learning in the late twentieth century, even when they are in the same geographical area, are as far apart as the worlds of the North and South of England in the mid nineteenth century. Literary theory, as a belief system, hovers over the action of *Nice Work* as Christianity does over *North and South*.

In both *North and South* and *Nice Work* the central relationship is between a woman and a man. This is, of course, common enough in novels, but it is particularly

important here as relations between women and men become the dominant principle which governs the respective narrative solutions. In each novel the hero and heroine[5] come from quite different spheres and have little knowledge of, and no sympathy with, each other's worlds. Forced together by circumstance, they come eventually to modify their attitudes and to value each other in a way that is unthinkable to either at the beginning of the novel. Despite, or perhaps because of, these differences, both heroes fall in love with the heroines (though the ensuing pattern of rejection and acceptance in *North and South* is parodically reversed in *Nice Work*). Both heroes incur the suspicion of fellow manufacturers by implementing courses of action which are strongly encouraged by the heroines. John Thornton, in *North and South*, finds that other mill owners disapprove of the philanthropic experiments he is pursuing in his own mill. Vic Wilcox, in *Nice Work*, is regarded as eccentric by the senior management of the firm which takes over Pringle's, because he has pin-ups taken down in the factory and visits the university one day a week. In both books the *deus ex machina* device of a legacy to the heroine enables her to rescue and further the hero's business plans: Vic's redundancy corresponds, of course, to Thornton's business failure.

The episode of the riot at Marlborough Mills, in which Margaret Hale first provokes John Thornton into facing his

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[5]I use the terms "heroine" and "hero" as a matter of convenience to describe the main protagonists in *Nice Work*, although they do not seem entirely appropriate in the context of Lodge's novel.

striking workers and then saves the situation by interposing herself between him and the rioters, is facetiously reproduced in *Nice Work*. The danger to the hero is changed from the threat of physical violence to the threat of ridicule. Robyn Penrose has been instrumental in persuading Vic Wilcox to address a meeting of his workers. Disruption is threatened by the arrival of a "kissogram" girl, who is also a student of Robyn's. (Lodge studiously imitates the Victorian novel in his use of coincidence.) Robyn saves the situation by authoritatively aborting the kissogram mission, thus preventing the deterioration of the meeting into total ribaldry and chaos.

Apart from the major parallels, there are numerous small points of likeness which, cumulatively, amount to a considerable body of evidence that *Nice Work* consciously mimics *North and South*. One such point of likeness is the hero's expectation of meeting a man, not a woman, when he first confronts the heroine. When Margaret Hale enters the room where John Thornton is waiting:

> Mr. Thornton was a good deal more surprised and discomfited than she. Instead of a quiet, middle-aged clergyman, a young lady came forward with frank dignity, - a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing. (*NS* 61)

Vic Wilcox's reaction, on being informed that his academic "shadow" now waiting in the reception area is female, goes beyond surprise and discomfort:

> He felt anger surging through his veins and arteries. A lecturer in English Literature was bad enough, but a *woman* lecturer in English Literature! It was a ludicrous mistake, or else a calculated insult, he wasn't sure which, to send such a person to shadow him. He wanted to rage and swear, to shout down the telephone and fire off angry memoranda. (*NW* 71)

And Robyn Penrose does indeed turn out to be for Vic Wilcox what Margaret Hale is for John Thornton: "a young lady of a different type to most of those he was in the habit of seeing".

In *North and South*, the differences between North and South are epitomized in the descriptions of the living rooms of the Thornton and Hale families. The differences in lifestyle between Vic and Robyn in *Nice Work* are first illustrated by the descriptions of their respective bedrooms. Vic, woken by a digital quartz alarm clock with snooze button, "paddles through the deep pile of the bedroom carpet to the *en suite* bathroom" (*NW* 4), while Robyn (alarm clock from Habitat, analogue dial, and brass bell on top) "goes to the window, treating the rugs spread on the sanded and waxed pine floorboards as stepping-stones" (*NW* 23). These bedrooms are gentle parodies of the stereotypical cultural values of the respective worlds (and social origins) of their occupants. Vic, from the world of industry and a working class background, values the efficiency and comfort which modern technology and money can provide; while Robyn, from the world of the academy and a comfortably middle class background, shows nostalgia for the plain artifacts of the past and a puritanical contempt for conspicuous luxury. Britain is, it seems, as divided as ever.

Nice Work imitates the construction of *North and South* in the leisurely pace at which it begins and the considerable acceleration which occurs towards the end. Both novels compress much incident into the last few chapters. Thematically, too, the novels resemble one

another in that the larger part is taken up with the entry of the heroine into the hero's world, but towards the end there is a reversal in which the hero enters the heroine's world and unexpectedly acquits himself with credit. John Thornton attends one of Edith Lennox's dinner parties in London and impresses the guests with his competence and common sense. Vic Wilcox, attending Robyn's lectures and tutorials, asks pertinent questions and uses literary critical terms appropriately.

Lodge's parody works both through excess and reversal. Elizabeth Gaskell's closing *deus ex machina* device is the legacy to Margaret Hale from Mr Bell. David Lodge's mimicry produces not one but two such proceedings. A mention of Robyn's Uncle Walter, from whom she inherits a fortune, is planted with apparent casualness in the early description of her background in Australia. It is one of Lodge's jokes that Robyn comes originally from Melbourne, an exaggeration of the South of *North and South*. While one of David Lodge's *deus ex machina* stratagems - the unexpected legacy - replicates the plot of *North and South*, the other realizes that phrase almost literally, in the person of wheeler-dealer academic Morris Zapp, a character well-known to readers of Lodge's other campus novels. Zapp sweeps through the closing section of the narrative:

> He had blown into the jaded, demoralised atmosphere of Rummidge University like an invigorating breeze, intimating that there were still places in the world where scholars and critics pursued their professional goals with zestful confidence, where conferences multiplied and grants were to be had to attend them, where conversation at academic parties was more likely to be about the latest controversial book or article than about the latest scaling-down of departmental maintenance grants. (*NW* 235)

Zapp appears as a god indeed, although Robyn eventually turns her back on the heavenly prospect of Euphoric State University. (Zapp is, of course, a *deus ex machina* only insofar as Robyn's own fate is concerned.)

The North/South dichotomy is illustrated in *Nice Work* as a shift of the powerhouse. There has been a change in Britain's centre of energy from the manufacturing industries of the Midlands and the North in the 1850s to the financial markets of the City of London in the 1980s: a change from the tangible to the intangible:

> "It's all paper," said Vic. "Moving bits of paper about. Whereas we *make* things, things that weren't there till we made 'em." (*NW* 192)

But industries like Vic's are decaying. The excitement which Mr Hale perceived in Milton in *North and South* has moved to the City of London. Charles, in *Nice Work*, describes watching foreign exchange dealers: "The first thing that struck me about the City when I started observing Debbie at work was the sheer *energy* of the place" (*NW* 223). Both novels regard the world of financial speculation with disfavour: *North and South* on ethical grounds, *Nice Work* on ideological and aesthetic ones.

The myth of progress is invoked in *North and South* through lively descriptions of the excitement generated by industrialization:

> After a quiet life in a country parsonage for more than twenty years, there was something dazzling to Mr. Hale in the energy which conquered immense difficulties with ease; the power of the machinery of Milton, the power of the men of Milton, impressed him with a sense of grandeur. (*NS* 69)

John Thornton speaks of the inventions that are revolutionizing the cotton trade - the sheer power of the new steam hammer - in an almost visionary manner:

> And this imagination of power, this practical realisation of a gigantic thought, came out of one man's brain in our good town. That very man has it within him to mount, step by step, on each wonder he achieves to higher marvels still. (*NS* 81)

Nor is Thornton's vision mercenary. He sees his calling - for so he regards his position as a cotton manufacturer - as a noble one. His pride is not in his wealth, but in his good name in the business world and, having remade the family fortune from scratch after his father's business failure, he has little patience with poverty. In John Thornton, Elizabeth Gaskell personifies Weber's Protestant work ethic. Even Margaret Hale, at first disliking Milton Northern intensely, finds the conversation of the Milton men invigorating.

The energy and excitement which constitute a part of the myth of progress do not appear in *Mary Barton*, which focuses on the negative effects of industrialization for workers. And these negative aspects of progress appear again in *North and South*, counterbalancing the energy and excitement. Immediately after the quotation above on Mr Hale's fascination with the power of Milton, the narrator comments that Mr Hale "yielded" to his sense of grandeur "without caring to inquire into the details of its exercise" (*NS* 69). Margaret, however, goes more among the working people and

> as it happened, she was thrown with one or two of those who, in all measures affecting masses of people, must be acute sufferers for the good of many. The question always is, has everything been

> done to make the sufferings of these exceptions as small as possible? Or, in the triumph of the crowded procession, have the helpless been trampled on, instead of being gently lifted aside out of the roadway of the conqueror, whom they have no power to accompany on his march? (*NS* 69)

Gaskell is not suggesting that progress should be impeded, only that those who suffer from it should be helped. The perceived inevitability of progress is itself part of the myth. The "helpless" casualties of industrialization in this case are Bessy Higgins and John Boucher. Bessy is directly a victim, dying of an occupationally induced disease; Boucher's suicide is caused by the many evils of his life, not least of which, Gaskell seems to imply, is trade unionism. As in *Mary Barton*, the masters do not choose to discuss trade fluctuations with their workers. When Margaret asks John Thornton why the masters cannot explain how bad the prospects for trade are, he responds with some arrogance:

> Do you give your servants reasons for your expenditure, or your economy in the use of your own money? We, the owners of capital, have a right to choose what we will do with it. (*NS* 117)

Two conflicting ideas - the glory of progress and its necessary infliction of suffering - run together through the narrative of *North and South*.

The doctrine of self-help is very clearly illustrated in the words of John Thornton. Thornton's attitude towards his "hands" is adversarial and he counters Margaret's assertion of the hatred and sense of injustice she believes workers feel with his own belief in the possibility of social mobility. Margaret sees suffering on the faces in the streets but, to Thornton, if there is suffering it is deserved. He suggests that suffering is only experienced

by those who are self-indulgent and sensual, lacking the capacity ever to deny themselves, and is "but the natural punishment of dishonestly-enjoyed pleasure, at some former period of their lives" (*NS* 85). Thornton's philosophy, when he is first encountered in *North and South*, is summed up as follows:

> It is one of the great beauties of our system, that a working-man may raise himself into the power and position of a master by his own exertions and behaviour; that, in fact, every one who rules himself to decency and sobriety of conduct, and attention to his duties, comes over to our ranks; it may not be always as a master, but as an over-looker, a cashier, a book-keeper, a clerk, one on the side of authority and order. (*NS* 84)

Thornton, with some initial reluctance, recounts the vicissitudes of his own family after his father's business collapse and subsequent suicide: how, through self-denial and hard work, the family was restored to affluence. He is gently reminded by Margaret's father of the educational advantages he had before being forced to abandon school for work, but Thornton sees no benefit here and appears blind to the fact (perceived by Mr Hale) that most of the positions he mentions as open to working men who wish to better themselves would require a reasonable standard of education. He believes that "any man who can read and write starts fair with me in the amount of really useful knowledge that I had at that time" (*NS* 85). Despite this utilitarian attitude towards education, however, studying the classics is a luxury which he affords himself now that he is financially established.

Although the self-help component of the progress myth is so strongly spelt out, the accompanying comments by Mr Hale make the point that all do not start equal in the

matter of self-help. A barely literate, unskilled working man cannot "start fair" with a well-educated, middle-class youth such as Thornton was. By the end of the novel Thornton has, of course, considerably moderated his ideas.

Lodge also deploys ideas of progress in his book. In *Nice Work*, the myth of progress is employed to satirize the idea that progress is inevitable and entails unlimited expansion. Robyn Penrose never loses her disgust at the conditions of the factory workers at Pringle's but she finds, like Margaret's father in *North and South*, that the sheer power and energy involved in industrial production fire her imagination. While touring the foundry with Vic, she is fascinated by the horror of the scene:

> The situation was so bizarre, so totally unlike her usual environment, that there was a kind of exhilaration to be found in it, in its very discomfort and danger, such as explorers must feel, she supposed, in a remote and barbarous country. (*NW* 88)

While Gaskell's Mr Hale is impressed by the immense power of industry and the human ingenuity which has produced the machinery, it is the danger and barbarity of the factory processes which fascinate Lodge's Robyn. (Both Mr Hale and Robyn seem to be innocents abroad in the context of industrial processes.) The prevailing myth of progress in the 1980s has changed from progress through industrialization to progress through technology, though both are alike in entailing human ingenuity. The switch to technology has, as depicted in *Nice Work*, led to the decline of manufacturing industry and the takeover of those small companies which have managed to survive in the depressed conditions by larger ones, combining into ever larger

comglomerates. This march of progress leaves in its wake an urban wasteland, such as the one surrounding Pringle's, and many redundant production workers.

The problem of unemployment features in both novels, and in *Nice Work* the prospect of her own unemployment is a recurring anxiety for Robyn. But by the 1980s, with social welfare well established, it is the psychological rather than the physical consequences of unemployment with which the novel is concerned. The alienating effect of factory work is portrayed as a lesser evil than the lack of status and identity entailed in not having paid employment. Vic Wilcox puts it this way:

> Men like to work. It's a funny thing, but they do. They may moan about it every Monday morning, they may agitate for shorter hours and longer holidays, but they need to work for their self-respect. (*NW* 85)

Robyn retorts that such attitudes are due to social conditioning and that society should instead be preparing people for creative leisure. But she has to admit that she would hate to give up her own job as a university lecturer, for hers is "nice work."

David Lodge has a sly dig at the whole idea of progress through the figure of Vic's father, who caricatures the innate conservatism of much of the British population. Mr Wilcox's stubborn refusal to move with the times, to let Vic install central heating for him, to accept contemporary prices for what they are, or even to buy a new overcoat on the grounds that quality is not what it was, acts as a foil to the conspicuous consumption of the rest of Vic's family. Such resistance to change for the sake of change, and suspicion that newer may not

necessarily be better, are perhaps admirable when seen against the background of the rest of the novel, Lodge suggests, tongue-in-cheek.

Although education is shown as a very important component of the myth of progress in *North and South*, the novel also qualifies this view by representing a type of education unlikely to broaden the mind and stimulate the imagination. Margaret Hale, visiting the Helstone parish school with Mr Bell, finds the wife of the new vicar treating the children to type of educational Gradgrindery featured in *Hard Times* (1854). The whole subject of education is viewed with some cynicism in *Nice Work*. Basil Penrose's girlfriend, Debbie, has become a highly successful foreign-exchange dealer with a minimum of education and a "barrow boy mentality" (*NW* 125). But self-improvement by education is still part of the myth in the 1980s: even Mrs Thatcher refused to abolish the Open University as a cost cutting measure, as some of her advisers recommended. Robyn Penrose, however, still clings to a belief in education as life enrichment, not merely as a training ground for employment. Robyn's idealistic vision of a university thrown open to the general public, where students, academics, and workers of all descriptions might meet in friendship is satirized as utopian:

> [Robyn] transported them, in her imagination, to the campus: the entire workforce - labourers, craftsmen, supervisors, managers, directors, secretaries and cleaners and cooks . . . and let them wander through it in a long procession, like a lost army, headed by Danny Ram and the two Sikhs from the cupola and the giant black from the knockout, their eyes rolling white in their swarthy, soot-blackened faces, as they stared about them with bewildered curiosity at the fine buildings and the trees and flowerbeds and lawns,

> and at the beautiful young people at work or play all around them. And the beautiful young people and their teachers stopped dallying and disputing and got to their feet and came forward to greet the people from the factory, shook their hands and made them welcome, and a hundred small seminar groups formed on the grass, composed half of students and lecturers and half of workers and managers, to exchange ideas on how the values of the university and the imperatives of commerce might be reconciled and more equitably managed to the benefit of the whole of society. (*NW* 249-50)

The parodic nature of the passage tends itself to deconstruct the nineteenth-century belief (expressed by Mr Bell in *North and South*) in education as the answer to social and political problems, through transferring this idealistic belief into the twentieth century. At the very end of *Nice Work*, Robyn watches from her window as a young, black gardener mows the university lawns. Students, much the same age as the gardener, move out of his way when they see the need, but no communication at all takes place - no one speaks, smiles, or even looks. The students are not apparently arrogant, nor the gardener resentful, there is "just a kind of mutual, instinctive avoidance of contact" and Robyn, remembering her vision of Utopia, "smiles ruefully to herself" (*NW* 277). Lodge's use of the word "contact" here is important, because it reflects on a key element of Gaskell's novels: the idea of contact between classes, very strongly asserted in *North and South*. Even when she is sceptical of solutions to social problems, Gaskell insists that contact is a basic necessity. Signs of the Christian myth are as evident in *North and South* as they were in *Mary Barton*: both feature reconciliation at the end.

As we saw previously, the idea of harmony through contact between classes and of all people as one community is insistent in Gaskell's novels and is an important element of her beliefs. The riot at Marlborough Mills reveals the differing attitudes of John Thornton and Margaret Hale to the rioters. Although both perspectives are given, narratorial sympathy is with Margaret. To Thornton, the rioters are an undifferentiated mob or pack: "men that make themselves into wild beasts" (*NS* 177), who challenge law and order generally and, specifically, his own legitimate authority to do as he judges best for his business. This view robs the rioters both of their humanity and their individuality. But Margaret recognizes Nicholas Higgins's neighbour, John Boucher, from the window. Her perception turns on this identification and she sees the strikers as individual men, driven mad by desperation:

> She knew how it was; they were like Boucher, - with starving children at home - relying on ultimate success in their efforts to get higher wages, and enraged beyond measure at discovering that Irishmen were to be brought in to rob their little ones of bread. (*NS* 177)

Thornton's reaction is to send for the troopers and defy the mob in contemptuous silence; Margaret's to attempt, by persuasion, to defuse the situation and forestall violence. And although Margaret's actions have several unforeseen consequences hers, it is intimated, is the better way. All individuals, whatever their class, are part of the one society: that is the message of *North and South*.

The Christian myth is also evidenced in the depiction of class relations. The relationship is still very unequal

but there is a reciprocity in *North and South* which does not occur in *Mary Barton*. Margaret Hale learns a great deal from the Higgins family and on, one occasion, comments that it has done her good to visit Bessy. Bessy, surprised and pleased, answers: "Bless yo'! I thought a' the good-doing was one the side of gentle-folk" (*NS* 138). John Thornton, too, learns from Nicolas Higgins (just as Higgins admits he learns from Thornton). Higgins describes to Margaret's father the two Mr Thorntons he has discovered - one the master he knew of old, the other "the chap that's a man" (*NS* 339). Thornton has taken to visiting the Higgins household - ostensibly to check on the educational progress of the Boucher children, possibly in the hope of meeting Margaret there. Nicholas describes such a visit:

> And I reckon he's taken aback by me pretty much as I am by him; for he sits and listens and stares, as if I were some strange beast newly caught in some of the zones. But I'm none daunted. It would take a deal to daunt me in my own house, as he sees. And I tell him some of my mind that I reckon he'd ha' been the better of hearing when he were a younger man. (*NS* 339)

On Mr Hale's enquiring whether Thornton has no answer to this, Nicholas admits: "Well! I'll not say th' advantage is all on his side, for all I take credit for improving him above a bit" (*NS* 339).

Like *Mary Barton*, *North and South* uses the Christian myth to suggest that social problems can be tackled by good will and "contact" on all sides. Everything depends upon personal relationships and the possibility of structural reform is never discussed. The novel's preferred position is put plainly in Thornton's reply to Mr Colthurst, the Member of Parliament interested in industrial problems:

> I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organise and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. (431-32)

"Personal contact" is the key. John Thornton installs a canteen at his mill and discusses industrial plans with his workpeople but, in spite of these innovations, he is ambivalent about the possibility of accord through closer personal relations between individuals of different classes - and perhaps unwilling to think beyond this level of personal contact to questions of social inequality. Thornton's reply to Mr Colthurst's query as to whether he thinks that his "experiments" may prevent strikes seems at odds with the statement he has just made:

> Not at all. My utmost expectation only goes so far as this - that they may render strikes not the bitter, venomous sources of hatred they have hitherto been. A more hopeful man might imagine that a closer and more genial intercourse between classes might do away with strikes. But I am not a hopeful man. (432)

The optimistic assertion of social harmony through increased goodwill and understanding is almost immediately thrown into doubt, however the importance of contact is still affirmed.

Little appeal is made to the Christian myth in *Nice Work*, except in imitation of *North and South*. This myth has no place in a largely secular society in its nineteenth-century form, although vestiges of it remain in concepts of global responsibility (Band Aid concerts for third world causes, concern over finite resources, saving planet earth, etc). Just as providential plots gradually

disappeared in the last century so, Lodge suggests, have ideas of personal redemption in our own, although idealism remains in the character of Robin. The British population in *Nice Work* appears fragmented, giving credibility to Mrs Thatcher's words that there is no society, only individuals and families. Robyn's superficial contact with Danny Ram is a long way from the visiting of each other's homes which occurs between the Hales and Higginses in *North and South*, however unusual or uncomfortable that visiting may be. It is notable, too, that John Thornton's home is beside Marlborough Mills and amongst the homes of his workpeople, but Vic Wilcox lives in an expensive suburb far from the urban wasteland where Pringle's is situated. In *Nice Work* there is little personal contact between individuals of different classes as Basil, Robyn's brother, points out when he challenges her: "Tell me one person you know, I mean *know*, not just know of, somebody you talked to in the last week, who earns less than six thousand a year" (*NW* 127). Robyn triumphantly names Danny Ram, but it is not really a convincing riposte.

In imitation of the Christian myth Lodge reproduces, with some irony, the plot device which promotes accord in *North and South*: the provision of a canteen for the mill workers where John Thornton himself also eats if invited. The sharing of food often symbolizes social cohesion, but Lodge uses the canteen to underline social divisions in *Nice Work*. The financially motivated decision to abolish the executive and middle management dining rooms at Pringle's is applauded by Robyn Penrose as a blow for democracy. The actual result has been, however, that only

the clerical and technical staff use the canteen. The managers, disliking the "dismal canteen with strip lighting, Formica-topped tables and moulded plastic stacking chairs" (*NW* 92) and stodgy food, eat at a local pub. And, in spite of the low prices, the workers bring their own food as they dislike the trouble of washing and changing out of their overalls to use the canteen.

One myth which Lodge does make use of is that of scientism. In its contemporary form, this myth is less concerned with the possible production of monsters than with advanced technology making human intelligence redundant, as machines reproduce themselves. There is both fascination and repulsion in Vic's description of "lightless factories full of machines." In answer to Robyn's query as to why the factories should be lightless, he replies:

> Machines don't need light. Machines are blind. Once you've built a fully computerised factory, you can take out the lights, shut the door and leave it to make engines or vacuum cleaners or whatever, all on its own in the dark. Twenty-four hours a day. (*NW* 85)

There is something peculiarly chilling, indeed monstrous, in the idea.

Emigration does not enter the plot of *North and South*, though the myth plays such a decisive part in the conclusion of *Mary Barton.* (Frederick Hale's enforced exile in Spain could hardly be classed as part of the emigration myth.) The emigration of Mary and Jem to Canada is the most powerful component of closure in *Mary Barton*: their marriage does not itself carry nearly the same impact. In *North and South*, however, Gaskell is much more

concerned with gender issues and the marriage of Margaret Hale and John Thornton. This is the definitive act of closure: the working out of the relationship between a woman and a man. The presentation in *North and South* of the difference between the industrial North and the rural South could be seen as gendered: the North aggressive, thrusting, materialistic (all qualities often attributed to the male gender); the South softer, cultured, giving more weight to spiritual values (all usually perceived as female qualities). As in the description of the Bartons' home in *Mary Barton*, Gaskell again uses domestic interiors to make her points. The difference in values of North and South is illustrated by the contrast between the drawing rooms belonging to the Thornton and Hale families. The Thorntons' drawing room is used only on formal occasions. The furniture is protected by net covers; the centre of the flowered carpet is covered by a linen drugget; the chandelier is enveloped in a bag; the ubiquitous alabaster ornaments have glass shades to protect them from dust; and the few books are arranged at precise intervals on the highly polished surface of the table. The room seems designed to repel the dirt and wear which would inevitably be introduced by human occupation:

> Everything reflected light, nothing absorbed it. The whole room had a painfully spotted, spangled, speckled look about it, which impressed Margaret so unpleasantly that she was hardly conscious of the peculiar cleanliness required to keep everything so white and pure in such an atmosphere, or of the trouble that must be willingly expended to secure that effect of icy, snowy discomfort. (*NS* 112)

This is decidedly not a room for habitation, it is being preserved "with as much care as if the house was to be

overwhelmed with lava, and discovered a thousand years hence" (*NS* 112). There is no obvious presence of family activity or harmony, suggesting that the North is too preoccupied with the external (masculine) concerns of the public sphere.

By comparison, the Hales' shabby drawing room appears as a haven of comfort to John Thornton. He thinks of the drawing room in his own home: "twenty times as fine; not one quarter as comfortable" (*NS* 78-79). The Hales' room is full of colour: the curtains and covers are of chintz and a vase is filled with different coloured leaves:

> Pretty baskets of work stood about in different places: and books, not cared for on account of their binding solely, lay on one table, as if recently put down. Behind the door was another table, decked out for tea, with a white table-cloth, on which flourished the cocoa-nut cakes, and a basket piled with oranges and ruddy American apples, heaped on leaves. (*NS* 79)

The lamp is lit and the curtains are left open to the night sky: the room welcomes human occupation, in every sense, epitomizing the female values of the private sphere. The Thorntons' drawing room is seen through Margaret Hale's eyes (with disapproval) and the Hales' living room through John Thornton's eyes (with approval), suggesting his recognition of southern, "female" values.

As discussed above, the North is identified with the masculine energy of industrialism in *North and South*. Margaret, at first repelled by Milton, is in time affected by the excitement and energy of its captains of industry. At a dinner party at the Thorntons' she finds the conversation stimulating:

> She liked the exultation in the sense of power which these Milton mer had. It might be rather

> rampant in its display, and savour of boasting; but still they seemed to defy the old limits of possibility, in a kind of fine intoxication. (*NS* 163)

(Gaskell's language in describing the North is often sexually loaded, e.g. "rampant" above, "mount" in the quotation from *NS* 81, etc.) Margaret compares this dinner table conversation with the conversations at Aunt Shaw's dinner parties in London. In Milton, "At any rate, they talked in desperate earnest, - not in the used-up style that wearied her so in the old London parties" (*NS* 163). Most of the southern characters in the novel tend to be depicted as indolent: Edith, her mother, Captain Lennox, even Mr Bell.

John Thornton's proposal of marriage to Margaret Hale in the middle of *North and South* is abruptly refused. But as the narrative progresses, Margaret's attitude changes, and at the end she is instrumental in inspiring a second declaration, which she accepts, thus concluding the story. This pattern of mistaken rejection followed by correct acceptance is ironically reversed in *Nice Work.* The night which Vic and Robyn spend together is announced at the beginning of Section Five:

> It was, perhaps, inevitable that Victor Wilcox and Robyn Penrose would end up in bed together in Frankfurt, though neither of them set off from Rummidge with that intention. (*NW* 191)

What the narrative loses in surprise, it makes up for in anticipation of just how this "inevitable" conjunction will come about. Unlike a Victorian heroine, Robyn suffers no pangs of retrospective conscience. In a reversal of the conventional pattern, she has found the experience eminently enjoyable, but is irritated at how seriously Vic

has taken the episode and at her own folly in unduly complicating her life. Although the central relationship in *Nice Work* is between a man and a woman, Lodge questions whether a love story is any longer a viable theme. Where marriage is the most significant component of closure in numerous Victorian novels, in *Nice Work* it is, of course, Robyn and Vic's *not* marrying which closes the story.

In the earlier chapters of *North and South*, Margaret Hale seems to embody the myth of the Angel in the House. John Thornton watches her when he takes tea with the Hales:

> [Margaret] handed him his cup of tea with the proud air of an unwilling slave; but her eye caught the moment when he was ready for another cup; and he almost longed to ask her to do for him what he saw her compelled to do for her father, who took her little finger and thumb in his masculine hand, and made them serve as sugar-tongs. Mr Thornton saw her beautiful eyes lifted to her father, full of light, half-laughter and half-love . . . (*NS* 79)

This scene accords well with the myth. Margaret, in the haven of the home, waiting upon her father and John Thornton, in the exquisitely domestic occupation of pouring tea. Even the fact that she has "the proud air of an unwilling slave" is part of the Angel mythology, as the "taming" of the beloved is often a feature of this myth and, in fact, an element of sadism unpleasantly underlies Coventry Patmore's own "The Abdication" from *The Victories of Love*:

> My queen was crouching at my side,
> By love unsceptred and brought low,
> Her awful garb of maiden pride
> All melted into tears like snow;
> The mistress of my reverent thought,
> Whose praise was all I ask'd of fame,
> In my close-watch'd approval sought
> Protection as from danger and blame;
> Her soul, which late I loved to invest
> With pity for my poor desert,

> Buried its face within my breast,
> Like a pet fawn by hunters hurt.[6]

Later in the novel, however, Margaret is shown to have acquired a sense of independence which is certainly not a part of the Angel myth. When her relatives try to prevent her going immediately to Oxford on hearing of Mr Bell's serious illness, she insists upon going and surprises herself "at the firmness with which she asserted something of her right to independence of action" (*NS* 411). Margaret has determined to control her own life:

> But she had learnt, in those solemn hours of thought, that she herself must one day answer for her own life, and what she had done with it; and she tried to settle that most difficult problem for women, how much was to be utterly merged in obedience to authority, and how much might be set apart for freedom in working. (*NS* 416)

Such sentiments concerning the lives of women seem to be grounded as much in the author's Unitarian beliefs as in any particular adherence to the cause of women's rights, at this stage of Elizabeth Gaskell's life. However, a growing unease and ambivalence about the role of women in society becomes increasingly perceptible in her writing from the time of *North and South*. And it is very noticeable how many of her novels and short stories, from her earliest work, depict independent working women. Although *North and South* does not, it nonetheless implies in Margaret's sentiments that a woman who does not marry may yet live a useful and fulfilling life.

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[6]Patmore 111.

When Margaret defies the Angel myth and steps from the private sphere to interpose herself between John Thornton and the rioters, she creates a dilemma for herself. Mortified to find that her action has been misinterpreted as "throwing her cap" at Thornton, she realizes in hindsight that her action has been at the same time both morally right and socially wrong.[7] The Angel myth is called into question by the divergence of ethical and social standards. To Unitarians, women are equally responsible for their own individual moral choices with men, and to abrogate moral responsibility to a husband, or even to society generally, would be wrong. Margaret's sense of independence and particularly her very strongly conveyed, though repressed, sensuality are certainly out of keeping with an Angel in the House.

In *Nice Work*, the Angel myth appears in several different guises, used by Lodge to measure attitudes towards gender in the 1980s. Robyn consciously tries to debunk the myth. The household chaos in which she lives; her weekend relationship with Charles; her fling with Vic; her vaunted feminism (which Lodge intimates is only skin deep at times), suggest that she is a thoroughly modern woman, whom Lodge is satirizing. In the 1980s, of course, the Angel in the House no longer has any social power. *Nice Work* does, however, show some residual traces of the myth. Vic's wife, Marjorie, a full-time housewife and

[7]See Patsy Stoneman's argument on this paradox in *Elizabeth Gaskell* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) 45.

compulsive consumer, tries desperately to conform to the idea of keeping one's man by maintaining a comfortable home and personal attractiveness. Robyn's mother finds her daughter's academic ambitions and reluctance to marry Charles puzzling, but tells Robyn that she could have both marriage and a career:

> "There's no reason why you shouldn't still have your own career. If that's what you want." She managed to imbue this last phrase with a certain pitying incomprehension. She herself had never aspired to a career, finding complete satisfaction in acting as her husband's typist and research assistant in the time she had left over from gardening and housekeeping. (*NW* 32)

Mrs Penrose seems to demonstrate a happy and fulfilled life within the terms of the myth, or at least a modern version of it. (And it could be inferred that Lodge is implying the provision of so much unpaid service must have been a great help in advancing her husband's career.)

The ending of *North and South* contains many of the plot elements of the traditional Victorian novel: several deaths, a marriage, and a legacy. An attempt is made to heal all the dichotomies shown: the marriage between Thornton and Margaret symbolically unites both North and South and trade and profession, and the division between classes is lessened by the friendship and co-operation which develop between John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins. Throughout the novel, Margaret Hale and John Thornton have gradually been moderated in outlook so that they become eventually very well-matched. The device of the legacy, and her known interest in the welfare of the Milton work-people, allow Margaret to make her gesture of reconciliation with propriety. The mechanisms of power in *North*

and South are altered by the heroine's inheritance. Although Margaret's covered face and "beautiful shame" at the time of Thornton's second proposal, might seem to imply that she has been absorbed into the Angel myth, as Mary Barton is finally, this is not the case here. The language of gesture in the final scene suggests differently. Thornton's placing of Margaret's arms about his neck and his reference to her placing them there at the time of the riot, retrospectively validate Margaret's stepping from the private to the public sphere. Neither sex triumphs, rather there is a treaty between them. In the final lines of the last chapter when they denote themselves as "man" and "woman," there is a complicity between the two suggesting that although they realize how others regard them, Margaret and Thornton themselves know they do not conform to the gendered stereotypes expected of them by society.

As in *Mary Barton*, the mythic narrative which develops in *North and South* contains many conflicting ideas, held in suspension. The march of progress is shown as exciting and stimulating, but it tramples regardless over the weak and helpless, entailing both grandeur and suffering. Self-help is advocated, but the inequalities built into the social system, which make self-help an impossibility for many, are clearly illustrated. The Christian myth promotes the idea that divisions between classes can be bridged by goodwill and contact between individuals from different classes, yet John Thornton has little hope that this process will lessen the frequency of industrial disputes. Margaret Hale is, in part, a veritable Angel in the House - dutiful, domestic, sweet natured, confined to the private sphere of the home,

but Margaret also develops independence, holds strong views and, by the end of *North and South*, asserts the right to live as she thinks fit. Marriage to Thornton and removal from London to Milton promise to liberate her from the constricting domesticity of life in Edith's household. The novel suggests that women should keep to the private sphere, yet that it is wrong for women not to have the moral courage to step into the public sphere if the occasion demands it. The balance within the mythic narrative is more evenly maintained in this novel than is the case in *Mary Barton*, ensuring aesthetic cohesion and, therefore, a strong sense of closure. Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates, in *North and South*, a sense of faith in the future. There is still a belief too, though perhaps not so strongly felt as in the case of *Mary Barton* or *Ruth*, that fiction can play a part in the improvement of society. Gaskell looks forward to a better, fairer world.

The main difference between the endings of *North and South* and *Nice Work* is, of course, that in the latter the protagonists do not end up in a romantic, but only a business, relationship. In *Nice Work* it seems no longer possible to suggest that the two different worlds depicted might successfully unite, as is suggested by *North and South*. The only connection between the worlds of industry and the academy is the investment of Robyn's legacy in Vic's new business enterprise. Their worlds may co-operate but not combine. The romantic matching of Margaret Hale and John Thornton in *North and South* is parodied in *Nice Work* in the fact that Vic Wilcox is three inches shorter than Robyn Penrose. Robyn gets her legacy from Uncle

Walter and a rather temporary and uncertain job at Rummidge, dependent upon the mysterious term "virement," but is left unpartnered by the defection of Charles. Vic's marriage appears to be revitalized and Marjorie will gain new purpose in her life by helping in his business. Even Raymond Wilcox has found employment (in a high technology industry). Jobs particularly, and money, seem to have replaced romance as the desirable ending. Robyn's legacy in *Nice Work* seems a much more obvious device than Margaret's legacy in *North and South*, which is prepared for by the fact that she is Mr Bell's goddaughter and, as he explicitly states, his heir. However, the two references to Robyn's Uncle Walter are far more peremptory, particularly the second - merely a mention that he was a smoker of "Player's Navy Cut" (*NW* 155). Perhaps, too, the fact that legacies are a common occurrence in Victorian novels, but are not nearly so popular a plot device in novels of the 1980s, makes the ending of *Nice Work* appear very arbitrary, attracting attention to its own deliberate contrivance.

Nice Work's mythic narrative contains as many contradictions as that of its predecessor. Progress, in the form of technology, is again exciting, providing better living standards for many, but also leaving thousands redundant and leading to an even more divided society. Higher education enriches lives and should be available to all, but many do not value education and do very well without it. In terms of the Christian myth, Pringle's works canteen should promote a democratic cohesion between different grades of employees, but it does not - it divides

them further. Advanced technology relieves workers of dirty, repetitive jobs, but results in unemployment and the horror movie scenario of lightless factories, manned by machines, but devoid of humans. Remnants of the pernicious effects of the Angel myth see Robyn utterly opposed, Marjorie oppressed, but Mrs Penrose happily fulfilled.

In *Nice Work*, the myth of emigration to make one's fortune is invoked when Robyn Penrose is offered a well-paid job at Euphoric State University by Morris Zapp, who almost stereotypically represents the energy of the New World. However, the offer is refused and a negative view given in Philip Swallow's acid warning that: "American academic life is red in tooth and claw" (*NW* 260). There is, it seems, no solution to be found through emigration in the 1980s. With Lodge's usual irony, a reversal of the emigration myth is created by Robyn's father, whose academic fortune has been made by *immigration* into Britain: "Professor Penrose's characteristic response to any suggestion that the family should revisit Australia being a shudder" (*NW* 23).

The main feature which differentiates Lodge's narrative from Gaskell's is the self-consciousness of his story-telling. Attention is frequently called to the constructedness of narrative, usually through the character of Robyn Penrose. Robyn is quite aware of how she constructs her telling. After she has entertained Charles with the story of Danny Ram: "She was pleased with the success of her story and the heroic role she had fashioned for herself in it" (*NW* 107). As she tells Penny Black about her night with Vic in Frankfurt and its aftermath,

the text alternates between their conversation and flash-backs, showing how Robyn is reconstructing events selectively. This attention to construction paves the way for the shamelessly manipulated resolution, and demonstrates Lodge's self-conscious parody of this type of ending. By this method, Lodge highlights some of the conventions of realism. At one point, Robyn Penrose comments: "I feel as if I'm getting dragged into a classic realist text, full of causality and morality" (*NW* 218). Lodge's joke is ostensibly at Robyn's expense - as a character who "doesn't herself believe in the concept of character" (*NW* 21). She is, in fact, imaginatively located in a parody of just such a text "full of causality and morality." But the joke extends further: the parody itself both mimics and deconstructs the narrative method of the realist text it addresses, showing that its reassurance is impossible.

Lodge's unabashed cynicism, and his exaggeration of typical traits of Victorian novels, or sometimes their reversal, result in the sense of completion, or closure, offered by *Nice Work* only being readily acceptable if the novel is viewed on the level of fantasy, rather than realism. The author seems to be saying: "This is the sort of ending you wanted - believe it if you like."

However, in looking back to the Great Tradition of "classic realist" novels and parodying their certainties, Lodge betrays some nostalgia. Parody may be used to express a sense of loss. There are no plots any more, or at least no plots on the scale of the Victorian plot. Faith in the future seems to have been lost, and without

faith in the future it is difficult for a writer to create a closed ending. Lodge can only do so by moving into the realm of fantasy.

In the next chapter, I discuss the construction of a myth from the "plot" of a life story: Elizabeth Gaskell's biography of Charlotte Brontë, the writing of which forced Gaskell to confront her own difficulties in reconciling authorship with woman's duty.

CHAPTER 4 - *THE LIFE OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË*

Although we are accustomed to speak of "plots" and "closure" in fiction, it is comparatively recently that biography has come to be seen as a genre to which those terms may usefully be applied. The known facts of a life from which a biography is constructed are necessarily selective and there may well be many facts and episodes from that life unknown to the biographer. Two biographers, selecting from the same pool of facts, may yet write entirely different biographies according to which facts they wish to emphasize and, perhaps more importantly, how they decide to construct their narratives. Where in the past critics of biography tended to concentrate on content alone, the focus has now shifted substantially to form. As one writer on biography puts it: "biography is a complex narrative as well as a record of an individual's life, a literary process as well as a historical product."[1] This is not, of course, to suggest that biographies are works of fiction, merely that a comparison of the structure of a biography with the structure of a fictional form, such as a novel, can provide insights into both. It is for this reason that Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* is included here.

As she was collecting material to begin writing the *Life*, Gaskell wrote to Ellen Nussey, the friend of Charlotte Brontë who provided many of Brontë's letters for use in the biography: "I am sure the more fully she -

[1]Ira Bruce Nadel, *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (London: Macmillan, 1984) 1.

Charlotte Brontë - the *friend*, the *daughter*, the *sister*, the *wife*, is known, and known where need be in her own words, the more highly will she be appreciated."[2] Notably, Currer Bell the writer is not included in this list. It appears that, even before she had completed her researches and commenced writing, Gaskell held a very clear idea of the view of her friend's character she wished to present to the public. It was her duty, Gaskell believed, to demonstrate the "truth," in the face of the many wildly erroneous articles published after Charlotte Brontë's death. Referring back for a moment to Peter Brooks' definition of plot given earlier ("the design and intention of narrative, [which] shapes a story and gives it a certain direction or intent of meaning"), it is clear that the "plot" of Charlotte Brontë's life, around which the biography is structured, was already quite firmly in Gaskell's mind, and there was little room in it for the role of writer. The idea of the Brontë sisters, writing their stories in the isolation of Haworth Parsonage on the wild Yorkshire moors, with an eccentric father, decadent brother, and faithful, aged servant as supporting cast, culminating in Charlotte's marriage and untimely, tragic death, appealed immensely to the story-teller in Elizabeth Gaskell. After her first meeting with Charlotte Brontë at the Kay-Shuttleworths', she wrote in some excitement to her friend, Catherine Winkworth: "Such a life as Miss B's I

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[2] *GL* 267 (376).

never heard of before."[3] Her information came, not from Brontë herself, but from Lady Kay-Shuttleworth (and most of it was either totally inaccurate or grossly exaggerated.) In spite of Gaskell's love of an exciting story - particularly if it had a touch of the Gothic about it - in writing the *Life* she believed she was presenting the truth. She had no idea, at least no conscious idea, of creating a myth.

Alan Shelston, in his Introduction to the *Life*, suggests that some of the fascination which Charlotte Brontë held for Elizabeth Gaskell may be attributed to the resemblance which Brontë bore to some of Gaskell's own heroines:

> As I have suggested, Charlotte Brontë possessed all the qualifications for the heroine of a Gaskell novel: like Mary Barton, like Margaret Hale in *North and South*, and to a lesser degree like Molly Gibson in *Wives and Daughters*, she had the responsibility of looking after a widowed and difficult father in the most unpromising of circumstances; she was confronted, as are the heroines of the novels, in the most immediate and personal way with the realities of sickness and death, and yet she survived, her moral integrity intensified by her superhuman self-denial.[4]

Charlotte Brontë must have appeared as a true-life heroine, too often misjudged by the world, just waiting to have her story sympathetically told by a born narrator like Elizabeth Gaskell.

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[3] *GL* 75 (124).

[4] Alan Shelston, introduction, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, Penguin English Library (1857; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975) 14-15. All further references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

On the surface, the friendship between Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë is an unlikely one - the circumstances of their lives were so different. There seems, however, to have been an immediate liking between them which ripened into a sound friendship. Alan Shelston suggests a reason for this:

> whatever the differences expressed in their social experience and behaviour, both women shared a common religious faith and, above all, a sense that the true expression of that faith was to be found in the subjugation of self to duty; the ethic manifests itself throughout Mrs Gaskell's works, and conversely throughout Charlotte Brontë's life. (13)

They "shared a common religious faith" only in the widest sense, as Elizabeth Gaskell was a Unitarian and Charlotte Brontë an Anglican, but their convictions on the subject of duty seem to have been very similar.

Even before she was approached by Patrick Brontë to write the *Life*, Gaskell had mentioned to George Smith, of Smith, Elder, that she would like to set down some of her own recollections of Charlotte Brontë for "my children, who all loved her."[5] The request from Mr Brontë, coupled with the grudging acquiescence of the Rev Arthur Nicholls, Charlotte's husband, gave Elizabeth Gaskell what Jenny Uglow describes as "the ultimate womanly sanction - duty."[6] In a similar way, Gaskell's writing of *Mary Barton* had been sanctioned by William Gaskell's suggestion that writing

[5] *GL* 242 (347).

[6] Uglow 392.

might help her to get over the death of their baby son, Willie.

Male sanction of women's writing was extremely important because of the dichotomy in social perceptions of what Mary Poovey terms "The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer." Poovey equates her "Proper Lady" with that ideal of feminine behaviour which began to emerge in literature of the eighteenth century and which "culminated, in the nineteenth century, in the paradigm of the Angel of the House."[7] As I have outlined previously, the myth of the Angel, good, decorous, modest, and self-sacrificing and, above all, limited to the confines of the home, loomed large, as the writings of authors such as Mrs Sandford and Mrs Ellis, quoted earlier, show. As Poovey says:

> The importance of this image for women writers must be obvious. Not only was marriage virtually the only respectable "occupation" for women (and both learning and writing were frequently seen as threats to domestic duty), but writing catapulted women directly into the public arena, where attention must be fought for, where explicit competition reigned.[8]

The writing of the biography suggests an implicit acknowledgement on Elizabeth Gaskell's part of the importance of women speaking in that public arena.

Elaine Showalter comments that: "The stereotype of the woman novelist that emerges in the early nineteenth century conflates the popular images of the old maid and the

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[7]Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1984) x.

[8]Poovey 35.

bluestocking."[9] This would hardly be an image which most women authors relished, or were likely to be indifferent to. Once it was generally known that Gaskell was the wife of a clergyman and mother of several children, attacks would usually be made, not through ridicule, but through charges of neglect of duty, and expressions of sympathy for William Gaskell were not uncommon.[10] For a woman such as Elizabeth Gaskell, with a strongly developed sense of duty, a major hurdle to be overcome in order to write was guilt at the idea of such self-indulgence. Uglow comments of Gaskell's early days of writing:

> Although her writing was a secret joy and a refuge from grief, she could not let herself see it as 'self-development'; in *Mary Barton* and her other early stories she was 'using her pen to the public good' as William Howitt had advised.[11]

Once again, male approval had been forthcoming for her first efforts. In this she was luckier than Charlotte Brontë, whose approach to Robert Southey was met with advice (quoted in the *Life*) which neatly summed up prevailing attitudes:

> Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. (173)

Showalter points out that "For women . . . work meant labor for *others*. Work, in the sense of self-development, was in

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[9]Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 6 note 5.

[10]See, for instance, a description of local reaction to Gaskell's authorship in Geraldine Jewsbury's letter to Jane Carlyle of December 1850. Quoted in Uglow 259.

[11]Uglow 169.

direct conflict with the subordination and repression inherent in the feminine ideal."[12]

However, as time went on Gaskell seems to have become convinced of the importance for women of some kind of self-expression: to be the Angel in the House was not enough. The following extract is from one of Elizabeth Gaskell's best-known letters (dated c.February 1850). Although this letter is so frequently quoted, it is extremely pertinent to the dilemma of the Angel in the House versus the Woman Writer, and therefore merits inclusion here. Gaskell's correspondent was Tottie Fox, a painter and a close friend:

> One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount. It is different with men, whose home duties are so small a part of their life. However we are talking of women. I am sure it is healthy for them to have the refuge of the hidden world of Art to shelter themselves in when too much pressed upon by daily small Lilliputian arrows of peddling cares; it keeps them from being morbid as you say; and takes them into the land where King Arthur lies hidden, and soothes them with its peace. I have felt this in writing, I see others feel it in music, you in painting, so assuredly a blending of the two is desirable. (Home duties and the development of the Individual I mean) . . . but the difficulty is where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other.[13]

The imagery of Gulliver, a giant bound down, and the tiny, irritating but essentially unimportant, Lilliputian arrows by which he is assailed, says a great deal about Gaskell's feelings on the restraints imposed upon women in her society. By the time of writing the *Life*, Elizabeth

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[12]Showalter 22.

[13]*GL* 68 (106).

Gaskell was able to mount a strong defence of Charlotte Brontë against any suggestion of neglect of duty. Gaskell saw in Brontë a fellow author who had suffered many of the same problems of the woman writer which she herself had faced.

Even though defending the right of women to express themselves through Art, Elizabeth Gaskell was still somewhat ambivalent about professionalism for women. Writing, she felt, should be spontaneous creativity, not undertaken primarily to make money. Jenny Uglow cites Gaskell's comments on the professional way Dinah Mulock Craik went about her writing, in comparison with her own, and Charlotte Brontë's, views. Gaskell's offer of help through introductions had been politely declined by Dinah Mulock, who was already doing very well on her own in London. Gaskell, perhaps a little miffed at such independence, wrote to Maria James:

> [O]ur nice little friend Miss Mulock is advertizing another [novel]. I wish she had some other means of support besides writing; I think it bad in it's [sic] effect upon her writing, which must be pumped up instead of bubbling out; and very bad for her health, poor girl. . . . I think Miss Brontë had hold of the true idea when she said to me last summer, 'If I had to earn my living, I would go out as a governess again, much as I dislike the life; but I think one should only write out of the fulness of one's heart, spontaneously.'[14]

Gaskell seems to have seen professionalism in matters of publication quite differently, as on several occasions she arranged re-publication of her short stories in new

[14] *GL* 105 (167-8).

collections in order to finance overseas holidays for the family. Effusions from the heart could be quite consistent with domestic duties.

However much she had come to see that the Angel myth was an insufficient ideal for women's happiness, Elizabeth Gaskell drew upon it copiously in writing the *Life*. Much stress is laid upon Charlotte Brontë's domestic accomplishments. Gaskell mentions that Miss Branwell taught her nieces sewing "and the household arts in which Charlotte afterwards was such an adept" (97) and recounts how Brontë would secretly re-peel the potatoes after Tabby, the old servant whose eye-sight was failing, had left black specks in them: "Miss Brontë was too dainty a housekeeper to put up with this; yet she could not bear to hurt the faithful old servant" (306). This observation is doubly effective in stressing Brontë's good housekeeping and also her feminine sensitivity to Tabby's feelings. Other references to Charlotte Brontë's skills as a housekeeper are used to illustrate how she contrived to balance domestic duties with her writing. Even when most inspired to write, Gaskell insists, Brontë never neglected any duty: "all her care was to discharge her household and filial duties, so as to obtain leisure to sit down and write" (306). Gaskell speaks of "the strong feeling of Duty being paramount to Pleasure, which lay at the foundation of Charlotte's character" (181) but also manages to convey that writing was not just pleasure to Charlotte Brontë but a duty to Art. The following passage is Elizabeth Gaskell's plea to the world to do justice to her friend and

to recognize the difficulties of her life and with what honour and determination she overcame them:

> Henceforward Charlotte Brontë's existence becomes divided into two parallel currents - her life as Currer Bell, the author; her life as Charlotte Brontë, the woman. There were separate duties belonging to each character - not opposing each other; not impossible, but difficult to be reconciled. . . . But no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother, as well as she whom God has appointed to fill that particular place: a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed. And yet she must not shrink from the extra responsibility implied by the very fact of her possessing such talents. (334)

Gaskell uses the word "quiet" in conjunction with duty on several occasions. Charlotte Brontë is presented very much as the Angel in the House, with her sense of duty, her quiet containment, her orderly management of the home. But together with this portrait Gaskell manages to portray a woman with God-given literary genius, who would be sinfully neglecting a different duty if she did not write.

All was not, however, plain sailing in the creation of Charlotte Brontë as domestic heroine. There are indications that Gaskell was not entirely at ease with much in the writing of the Brontë sisters. Apart from the strong-minded, deeply feeling heroines of Charlotte's novels, there were the violence and passion of Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and the treatment of alcoholism in Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. She was, however, determined to answer the charges of coarseness levelled against them, not by denying that it existed, but by explaining that some coarseness was inevitable, given the circumstances of the Brontë sisters. The term "coarseness" was used not only to

denote socially unacceptable subject matter but any portrayal of violent feeling, particularly sexual passion, and also, in women characters, anger or ambition. Of Charlotte herself, Gaskell remarks on "how utterly unconscious she was of what was, by some, esteemed coarse in her writings." This is followed, two paragraphs later by:

> I do not deny for myself the existence of coarseness here and there in her works, otherwise so entirely noble. I only ask those who read them to consider her life, - which has been openly laid bare before them, - and to say how it could be otherwise. (495)

The life "openly laid bare" has something of the sound of a sacrifical victim. The *Life* is the "body" of mitigating evidence which allows the novels to be accepted (in all their "coarseness") as the product of a "pure" mind.

In the "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell," written for the combined edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* which she herself had edited in 1850 after the death of both her sisters, "Currer Bell" remarks that the sisters had no suspicion when they sought to publish their work that "our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine'." At the same time, Charlotte gives the reason the Brontë sisters had for choosing androgynous names under which to publish. While they had conscientious scruples about "assuming Christian names positively masculine" they did not want to declare themselves women

and find their work judged on the sex of the author, rather than on its innate qualities.[15]

Without disturbing the Angel myth, and having established the duty a talented woman owes to Art, Elizabeth Gaskell manages skilfully to incorporate Charlotte Brontë's views on more equal treatment for women. Brontë defends her writing, and implicitly what others term its occasional coarseness, in a letter to George Henry Lewes. After saying that she wishes all reviewers believed "Currer Bell" to be a man, she continues:

> You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful, you will condemn me . . . Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand." (386)

Elaine Showalter puts forward the theory that, far from being creations of romantic wish fulfilment, the idealized lovers which they are often taken to be, the heroes created by Victorian women novelists may well be projections of the author's own ambitions: a fantasy of what she might do or be if she had the power and opportunities only available to males. Many of the fantasies of novels by women authors are concerned with "money, mobility, and power," Showalter observes, and the hero or "woman's man"

> was often a more effective outlet for the 'deviant' aspects of the author's personality than were her heroines, and thus male role-playing

[15]Currer Bell, Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell, *Wuthering Heights*, by Emily Brontë, ed. David Daiches (1847; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965) 31.

> extended beyond the pseudonym to imaginative content.[16]

A letter written by Charlotte Brontë in March 1845 contains the words: "I feel as though we were all buried here. I long to travel; to work; to live a life of action" (275) - all aspirations far easier for a man to achieve than for a woman. Brontë, through the voice of her heroine, makes an impassioned plea in *Jane Eyre* that women be allowed more opportunities:

> Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.[17]

But like Elizabeth Gaskell herself, Charlotte Brontë only thought in terms of reform within the existing system. In a letter to Gaskell in August 1850, she touches on the position of women in society and mentions that many men are beginning to see the injustices but insisting that improvement must depend on women's own efforts. She continues:

> Certainly there are evils which our own efforts will best reach; but as certainly there are other evils - deep-rooted in the foundations of the social system - which no efforts of ours can touch: of which we cannot complain; of which it is advisable not too often to think (422).

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[16]Showalter 28.

[17]Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Q.D. Leavis (1847; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966) 141.

Charlotte Brontë's overwhelming sense of duty and political conservatism seem to have made her resigned to the status quo. She was no advocate of political action, and it was therefore possible for Gaskell to explain, to justify, and to encompass her opinions within the myth of the Angel.

Other aspects of Charlotte Brontë's character were not to be so easily encompassed, however. From the time she began to plan writing the *Life*, Gaskell assumed that there would be some things which she would have to omit to avoid giving offence to living people (particularly Patrick Brontë and Arthur Nicholls). This would be inevitable in the construction of a biography as it would obviously be impossible to include everything. What she had not expected was to come across highly significant material which she felt obliged to conceal, even to the extent of changing the dates of events in order to do so. Elizabeth Gaskell's overriding impulse in writing the *Life* was to enhance the reputation of her friend, as a woman much more than as a writer. Her horror at the discovery of Brontë's letters to Constantin Héger, her teacher in Brussels and a married man, can be imagined. It has often been observed that the passage quoted above from *Jane Eyre* occurs just before Jane hears the mad laughter of Bertha Mason Rochester (and before she knows of Bertha's existence). Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their famous study *The Madwoman in the Attic*,[18] see Bertha as the dark, or

[18]Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979).

sensual, side of Jane herself - her alter ego. Similarly, the Charlotte Brontë of Belgium, the writer of those passionate letters, must have come to seem to Elizabeth Gaskell a veritable Madwoman in the Attic. The letters introduced a totally disruptive element which Gaskell had either to accommodate or eliminate. Accommodation was unthinkable. Brontë's reputation would have been totally destroyed and her husband and father shocked and grieved. Elimination was the only option. There has been some speculation as to whether Elizabeth Gaskell actually saw the whole text of Brontë's four letters. Winifred Gérin, biographer of both women, provides conclusive proof that she did.[19] In the event, Gaskell used brief, innocuous extracts from two of the four letters, interweaving them and making only a vague reference to dates. Since it was necessary to account for Brontë's abrupt departure from Brussels and her depression both during her second stay there and subsequently after her return to Haworth, Gaskell brought forward the date of Branwell's disgrace by eighteen months.[20] One can sympathize with Elizabeth Gaskell's position - she acted from the most well-intentioned motives - but in the re-ordering and omissions she effectively blanked out probably the most intense emotional experience of Charlotte Brontë's life.

[19]Winifred Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1969) 571 and *Elizabeth Gaskell: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1980) 170-71.

[20]Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë* 573.

It was not Elizabeth Gaskell alone who edited Charlotte Brontë's letters. Ellen Nussey made many deletions, particularly of names and places, before she handed her letters over to Gaskell (and it is also known that she did not hand over all the letters in her possession). As Jenny Uglow observes: "This editing, of course, also edited Charlotte's character - we miss some of her humour, and much of her tartness."[21] That she was aware of a little tartness in Charlotte's disposition, not quite in accord with the Angel myth, is made clear from Elizabeth Gaskell's comment on how Charlotte's friends regarded her marriage: "We thought of the slight astringencies of her character, and how they would turn to full ripe sweetness in that calm sunshine of domestic peace" (519). Any little deviations from the Angel myth which might have become apparent in the *Life* would have been set right by marriage, had her married life not been so tragically cut short, Gaskell implies.

In spite of all the furore which broke out after publication of the *Life*, the threatened law suits and demands for retraction which necessitated the withdrawal of the first edition and the issuing of an amended edition, Elizabeth Gaskell proved to have been triumphantly successful in her creation of the myth of Charlotte Brontë. The biography was highly praised by literary figures, such as Charles Kingsley, who found the "coarseness" of Brontë's work excused and declared that purity is quite compatible

[21]Uglow 403.

with a knowledge of evil, and Anna Jameson, who believed the book would aid the cause of women by exciting the sympathy of men.[22] The "coarseness" of the novels was forgiven, as being due to extenuating circumstances. The *Saturday Review* blamed the pernicious influence of the European continent (Charlotte's education in Brussels), while the *Quarterly Review* blamed the depravity of Branwell.[23]

The biography had provided a means of exonerating Charlotte Brontë from accusations of "coarseness." Reactions such as those above prove how very successful Elizabeth Gaskell was in her vindication of her friend. But her sincere attempt to portray the "truth" of the woman resulted rather in the creation of the myth of the tragic heroine. Even before the publication of the *Life*, Showalter notes, the public had become intrigued by the Brontë sisters, and after its appearance: "The Brontë legend rapidly took on the psychic properties of a cult, complete with pilgrimages to Haworth and relics of the three sisters."[24]

The reaction of the early feminist, Anna Jameson, to the *Life* (quoted above) was extremely positive. She was optimistic as to its effects. However, the effect of writing the biography on Elizabeth Gaskell's own view of

[22]Quoted in Uglow 429, with the observation that these reactions show how "Gaskell had pitched her book to suit the temper of the age."

[23]Quoted in Showalter 93.

[24]Showalter 106.

life may not have been so happy. She began the biography optimistically, in a crusading spirit, to vindicate her friend. But what she became aware of during her researches seems to have had a profound effect upon her attitudes, which is reflected in her subsequent writing. The knowledge that she had had to omit much and make alterations in order to make plausible what she reported, when she had started out to make known the "truth" of Charlotte Brontë, must have been sobering for Elizabeth Gaskell, particularly in view of the attitude towards lying shown in *North and South*, for instance. She had succeeded in producing the portrait of a conventionally "noble" woman, but only by the concessions she had made to the myth of the Angel in the House. The dawning realization that the terrible isolation and restriction of Charlotte Brontë's life differed only in degree from the experience of many women, and that the kind of radical social changes which would be required to improve the position of women were very unlikely to occur in the foreseeable future, may account for some of the pessimism which underlies Gaskell's later work, particularly *Wives and Daughters*.

Seventy five years after Elizabeth Gaskell wrote *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Virginia Woolf still battled the Angel in the House. This phantom hovered at her shoulder, attempting to guide her pen, telling her that women cannot write freely and openly: "they must charm, they must conciliate, they must - to put it bluntly - tell lies if they are to succeed". It was essential, Woolf believed, for women writers to kill the Angel and she continues:

> Thus, whenever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality . . . Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.[25]

Gaskell could not go that far. Her sense of duty battled with her uneasiness at the injustices she plainly saw in the position of women in her society. But she had achieved enough for the time being by justifying Charlotte Brontë in the eyes of the world.

There were considerable pressures upon Elizabeth Gaskell to create a particular type of narrative in the writing of the *Life*. The fact that both Brontë's father and widower were alive and vulnerable was the most obvious of these pressures, but there were also social considerations to be taken into account. The Victorians expected biographies to have a moral purpose, in fact to inspire by the example of the life portrayed. Where the subject was dead, as was usually the case, there was an expectation that the biography would be rounded off - and most effectively closed - by the subject's death and some account of the influence that life had had. Women's writing was frequently judged, as Charlotte Brontë complained to G.H. Lewes in the letter quoted above, by standards of what was fitting for a female to deal with, and writing by the wife of a minister of religion attracted even closer scrutiny. Gaskell had already transgressed

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[25]Virginia Woolf, "Professions for Women" (text of lecture given in 1931), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Vol 2* 4th edition, ed. M.H. Abrams (New York: Norton, 1979) 2047.

once in this way in the writing of *Ruth*.[26] Charlotte Brontë had experienced pressure of a more immediate kind about the ending of *Villette*. Gaskell mentions in the *Life* that Brontë's father had pressed for a happy ending "as he disliked novels which left a melancholy impression upon the mind." The wish to please her father placed Brontë in something of a dilemma because, as Gaskell puts it, "the idea of M. Paul Emanuel's death at sea was stamped on her imagination till it assumed the distinct force of reality" (484). Brontë compromised by leaving the ending of *Villette* ambiguous, so that readers are left to decide for themselves whether or not Paul Emanuel dies. She thus achieved a balance between submitting to parental authority, and natural affection, on the one side, and her own vision on the other. Brontë touched on the question of pressures upon artistic integrity in two of her letters to Gaskell. After receiving a sketch of the plot for *Ruth*, Charlotte Brontë writes:

> Yet - hear my protest! Why should she die? Why are we to shut up the book weeping? My heart fails me already at the thought of the pang it will have to undergo. And yet you must follow the impulse of your own inspiration. If *that* commands the slaying of the victim no bystander has a right to put out his hand to stay the sacrifical knife; but I hold you a stern priestess in these matters.[27]

[26]The subject of unmarried motherhood was not considered a fit subject for a novel, particularly when the heroine was the unmarried mother. Although Elizabeth Gaskell ultimately sacrificed Ruth, members of William Gaskell's congregation burned the book in outrage.

[27]Quoted in Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 132.

This letter was written in April 1852, well before the completion of *Villette*. The second letter is dated July 9th, 1853, six months after *Villette*'s publication:

> Do you, who have so many friends, - so large a circle of acquaintance, - find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your *own woman*, uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect other minds; what blame or what sympathy it may call forth? Does no luminous cloud ever come between you and the severe Truth, as you know it in your own secret and clear-seeing soul? In a word, are you never tempted to make your characters more amiable than Life, by the inclination to assimilate your thoughts to the thoughts of those who always *feel* kindly, but sometimes fail to see justly? (504-5)

The words seem sadly prophetic when it is remembered that Elizabeth Gaskell herself was to face just such problems only two years later in embarking on the biography of her friend.

The difficulties of closure facing women writers are indicated by the choice of imagery used both by Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell. In Brontë's letter quoted above, Gaskell's eponymous heroine, Ruth, is seen as a sacrificial victim, with Gaskell herself the priestess performing the ritual of sacrifice. Victorian novelistic conventions dictated that sinners must be seen to suffer, especially when those sinners were fallen women. The death of Ruth, after her hard-won social rehabilitation, provides a strong sense of closure in that novel. Gaskell's words from the *Life*, quoted above, that she has "openly laid bare" Charlotte Brontë's life for readers to consider also have undertones of sacrifice, with Brontë as victim. Here it is a part of Charlotte Brontë's character, the Madwoman in the Attic in fact, which has been cut out in order to

present Brontë as the Angel in the House. Women writers must ever be conscious of the demands of convention; but in sacrificing a part of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell sacrifices some of her own artistic integrity.

The devices which Gaskell uses to resolve the plot in *Mary Barton* are marriage and emigration; in *North and South* they are marriage and financial resolution. The "plot" of the *Life* is also resolved by Charlotte's marriage, "the too short, almost perfect happiness of her nine months of wedded life" (512), and finally her death. These elements, and the balance which is created between domestic and artistic duty, combine to form a mythic narrative of such aesthetic cohesion that an extremely strong sense of closure is provided. The mythic narrative does not, of course, provide any solution to the problems of women writers: the "where and when to make one set of duties subserve and give place to the other" which Elizabeth Gaskell mentioned to Tottie Fox. But it resonates with the powerful myth of the Angel in the House and enables the paradoxical ideas that a woman's most crucial role is as the Angel, yet that it is very wrong for her to neglect her God-given talents, to be held in tandem. The mythic narrative is, however, based on denial. Elizabeth Gaskell, being aware of Charlotte Brontë's feelings for Constantin Héger, was also aware that her marriage to Arthur Nicholls was not the love match of Brontë's life. Given this, there is a feeling of fictionality about the ending. The alternative "plot" - the one concerned with Héger - is suppressed.

The denial and suppression involved in closing *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* seem to be echoed in Elizabeth Gaskell's later work. *Wives and Daughters* in particular has a mood of sadness and a sense of the constriction of women's lives not apparent in either *Mary Barton* or *North and South*. This novel will be the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5 - *WIVES AND DAUGHTERS*

In those of Elizabeth Gaskell's novels written after *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, marriage no longer features as an element of closure. In *Mary Barton*, *North and South*, and particularly in the *Life* itself, marriage is integral to the ending. However, in *Sylvia's Lovers*, Sylvia's marriage (to the "wrong" man) occurs in the middle of the book and is vital in moving the narrative forward, rather than ending it; and *Cousin Phillis*[1] is brought to a close by Holdsworth's *not* returning to marry Phillis. The case of *Wives and Daughters* is, of course, a special one in that it is unfinished. Admittedly Cynthia has married, but Cynthia's story is very much subsidiary to Molly's, and Molly's fate is left open.

The freedom of action enjoyed by the heroines of the earlier novels is in marked contrast to the constriction of women's lives depicted in *Wives and Daughters* and, to some extent, in the two preceding novels. Mary Barton is allowed some of the freedom of a male hero in her dash to Liverpool and chase down the Mersey by boat in pursuit of the missing witness. Margaret Hale makes her own life decisions and pursues philanthropic work in the London slums. In the light of the later novels, these episodes have the air of female daydreams. Sylvia Robson, a farmer's daughter, enjoys rambling on the moors at the beginning of *Sylvia's Lovers*, but marriage to a shopkeeper

[1] I class *Cousin Phillis* as a novel for present purposes, although the point is arguable on the grounds of its length.

finds her largely restricted within the town limits, as her husband regards walking on the moors as improper. Cousin Phillis is not so restricted physically, but is restricted psychologically by her parents' inability to recognize that she is no longer a child.

Molly Gibson, having been used to accompanying her father on his rounds on horseback, is constrained in her physical activities after her father's remarriage by her stepmother's officious surveillance and ideas of ladylike behaviour. This is represented as very irksome to her:

> Very often [Molly] did not go out at all, sooner than have to give a plan of her intended proceedings, when perhaps she had no plan at all, only thought of wandering out at her own sweet will, and of taking pleasure in the bright solemn fading of the year.[2]

It is not, however, only physical restraint but restraint on the expression of feeling from which Molly suffers, and this is not due to her stepmother's attitude as much as to her father's. Mr Gibson, we are told, has "rather a contempt for demonstrative people" (30) and when Molly says wistfully that it is a comfort to have him to herself for a time, his reaction is that it is "better for them both that they should not speak out more fully" (419). Both Mary Barton and Margaret Hale are put in a position where they may declare their feelings. Mary states her love for Jem quite openly in court (perhaps the most public setting possible): Margaret does not speak so directly, but

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[2]Elizabeth Gaskell, *Wives and Daughters*, ed. Angus Easson, World's Classics (1866; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987) 481. All further references are to this edition and will be incorporated in the text.

indicates her love in a way which is quite clear to John Thornton. But Molly is never allowed a similar expression of her feelings for Roger: he departs for Africa without any open avowals being made by either lover.

Although there are marked differences between the earlier novels and *Wives and Daughters*, some continuities exist. As in the case of its predecessors, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, several prevailing myths appear in *Wives and Daughters*. The myth of progress has nothing to do with industrialization here but can be seen in the changes gradually occurring in Hollingford society. *Wives and Daughters* is set at an earlier period than the other two novels[3] and here progress concerns developments in the social structure. The power of landowners like Squire Hamley, who have land but a modest income, is declining and men like Robert Preston are rising. Davidoff and Hall note that, early in the nineteenth century, there was "an unease surrounding positions which had grown with commercial and manufacturing society: the agent, bailiff and factor."[4] Preston, a man who has helped himself in the tradition of Samuel Smiles, is one of this new breed of professional managers.

Here, however, the myths of progress and scientism intersect in the form of Darwinian theories of evolution, which combine them. The heir of the aristocratic Cumnor

[3]Angus Easson estimates the action as running from 1822 to 1830, with some small inconsistencies as to the date of events (note 2, p.689-90).

[4]Davidoff & Hall 198.

family, Lord Hollingford, invites to the Towers people who are "distinguished for science and learning, without regard to rank; and, it must be confessed, without much regard to polished manners likewise" (36). Science, in *Wives and Daughters*, is represented as an important element in promoting harmonious class relations, as the common interests of men of science cut across class boundaries. There is a broader social framework in *Wives and Daughters* than in the earlier novels, and the book is more conservative in spirit. Here members of the aristocracy are included and they are shown as taking their responsibilities to the community seriously. In this way, it is intimated, a social balance can be achieved, and social change can proceed as a gradual process of evolution, without sudden disruption.

Roger Hamley is, of course, a scientist; by the time the narrative breaks off, a famous scientist. It seems likely that Elizabeth Gaskell had her cousin, Charles Darwin, in mind when developing the character of Roger Hamley. A letter of 3rd May 1864 to George Smith gives an early plot outline for the novel in which Roger's character, provisionally named Roger Newton (the name is significant), "works out for himself a certain name in Natural Science, [and] is tempted by a large offer to go round the world (like Charles Darwin) as naturalist [sic]".[5] In terms of the novel's values, a pessimistic reading might see the future as being in the hands of

[5] *GL* 550 (732).

ethically dubious men of commerce, like Robert Preston, but an optimistic reading might see it as in the hands of honest, well-intentioned men of science, like Roger Hamley. Although the question of which will become dominant is left open, there is no doubt that Elizabeth Gaskell's sympathies are in this case with the men of science. Robert Preston quite lacks those qualities of paternalism and social responsibility which enabled another man of trade, John Thornton, to make an appropriate hero in *North and South*.

The Christian myth, as seen through the medium of *Wives and Daughters*, is also concerned with the social structure of small town life. The comfortable association between Squire Hamley and his tenant, Old Silas, and the co-operation in the matter of the 'industrial' school between Lady Cumnor and the ladies of Hollingford are relationships dependent upon the acceptance by all of their place in the social order. They make for feelings of security and of belonging safely within a Christian community. It seems significant that, while *Mary Barton* and *North and South* both deal with contemporary social problems, this co-operative social order has been displaced into the past. The problems of social relationships in an industrialized present may have come to be seen as insoluble, whereas the social mechanisms in *Wives and Daughters* are depicted as working well. Elizabeth Gaskell writes with a strong sense of history and this social order is seen as illustrative of times past. But the past is not without its negative aspects. Gaskell also shows the other side of the Christian myth in Molly's treatment by the rumourmongers of Hollingford. It is not Mrs Gibson alone

who circumscribes the actions of Molly and Cynthia. Not only the town of Hollingford but the surrounding countryside seem full of prying eyes, which observe their activities: the woman at the cottage whose child Molly helps, for instance, and Mr Sheepshanks, who sees Molly and Mr Preston together. One of Jane Austen's characters tellingly describes such a social world as one "where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies,"[6] and while Elizabeth Gaskell's dissection of small communities is less damning than Jane Austen's, momentary exasperation and disillusion with the social order appear in *Wives and Daughters* in a way they do not in *Cranford*. Hollingford reveals a darker side of Cranford, as the novel attacks the injustice of communal judgment. The inference may be drawn that whereas this world might have positive social qualities - it is co-operative and balanced - at another level, i.e. for women, it is pernicious.

In the past, *Wives and Daughters* was often regarded either as a country idyll or as a comedy of manners. John Lucas describes it as "an idyllic novel,"[7] and Walter Allen as "charming" and "the kind of social comedy in which women novelists traditionally excel."[8] But such descriptions overlook the sense of pain and loss which pervades much of

[6]Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*, ed. Anne Henry Ehrenpreis, Penguin English Library (1818; Harmondsworth: Penguin 1972) 199.

[7]John Lucas, *The Literature of Change: Studies in the Nineteenth-Century Provincial Novel* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980) 2.

[8]Walter Allen, *The English Novel: A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1958) 183.

the novel, particularly with regard to Molly. Barbara Hardy's comment that "*Wives and Daughters*, like *Cousin Phillis*, reveals almost unbearable sadness, and shows how human beings bear it"[9] seems a far more perceptive view, given that the novel has at times a restrained and melancholy tone absent from the author's early work.

I would argue that the dark side of Cranford appears because of Elizabeth Gaskell's new awareness, after writing the *Life*, of the position of women. There is in *Wives and Daughters* an overt plot, which concerns the love stories of two young women in a small country town, and also a covert plot which is concerned with the restraint and silencing of women. The covert plot manifests itself again and again throughout the story, in a way which undercuts the myth of the Angel in the House. The unspecified, lowering illnesses which afflict Cynthia, Mrs Gibson, and Molly herself at various points in the narrative, contribute to an atmosphere of melancholy. There seems, in fact, to be a subtext of death and illness throughout *Wives and Daughters*. Underlying this atmosphere of disappointment and constriction is the question of the position of women in society - an issue that cannot be evaded. Elizabeth Gaskell took no directly public part in the contemporary discourse of women's rights, although her letters to Tottie Fox and Charlotte Brontë - and her own work - show that she was aware and interested in the issue. She was, however,

[9]Barbara Hardy, "Mrs Gaskell: Novelist of Sensibility," *The Collected Essays of Barbara Hardy: Volume One, Narrators and Novelists* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987) 86.

somewhat ambivalent about what measures could or should be taken to alleviate the position of women. As the *Life* clearly shows, Gaskell's ideas of conflicting duties made it difficult for her to subscribe completely to the ideas of *avant garde* feminists like Barbara Bodichon (whom Gaskell admired theoretically but disliked personally when she met her).[10] Persuaded by Tottie Fox, Elizabeth Gaskell signed the petition to amend the law on married women's property on New Year's Day 1856. She was not, however, hopeful about the results and wrote to Tottie:

> I don't think it is very definite, and *pointed*; or that it will do much good, . . . a husband can coax, wheedle, beat or tyrannize his wife out of something and no law whatever will help this that I can see. . . . However our sex is badly enough used and legislated *against*, there's no doubt of *that* - so though I don't see the definite end proposed by these petitions I'll sign.[11]

Gaskell implies that there is a distinction between social and domestic "law." Social law cannot always cross the gulf which exists between the public domain and the private domain to impinge upon patriarchal law within the family.

The title *Wives and Daughters* is itself significant in that it defines women in terms of their relationship to others, specifically the family. One of the most salient characteristics of the Angel in the House is her propensity for self-sacrifice: and much silent self-sacrifice is required of Molly Gibson during the course of the novel.

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[10] See Uglow 312.

[11] *GL* 276 (379).

Early in the story, Molly queries Roger's conventional advice to find happiness in living for others:

> It will be very dull when I shall have killed myself, as it were, and live only in trying to do, and to be, as other people like. I don't see any end to it. I might as well never have lived. (139)

The strength of Molly's objection to such total denial of the self is left in no doubt. Although Gaskell never explicitly suggests it, the conclusion which could be drawn from her use of the Angel in the House myth is that it is a case of kill or be killed. If women do not kill the Angel, the Angel will kill - or at least maim - them. The distorting effect which the Angel myth can have upon the characters and lives of women is shown at its worst in Mrs Gibson. Outwardly she appears a true Angel: softly-spoken, with an extremely pleasant voice, pretty and becomingly dressed, and apparently dedicated to the needs of others. Mr Gibson proposes to her entirely on the strength of her outward appearance and lives to regret it. Mrs Gibson is egotistical, manipulative, vain, and shallow, and the Gibsons' marriage turns out to be far from the idealized domesticity of the myth. Mr Gibson "from principle, avoided all actual dissensions with his wife, preferring to cut short a discussion by a sarcasm, or by leaving the room" (431). On such occasions, Mrs Gibson observes that "dear papa" seems a little irritable and plans something he likes for dinner:

> And thus she went on, groping about to find the means of reinstating herself in his good graces - really trying, according to her lights, till Molly was often compelled to pity her in spite of herself . . . (431)

So the small domestic tragedy continues, for Mrs Gibson never can reinstate herself. Her crime is in not being the person her husband took her for when he married her, and for this he blames his own folly. The situation can only remain tolerable by the exercise of diplomatic blindness on all sides.

Although she is the cause of much of Molly's unhappiness, Mrs Gibson is not portrayed unsympathetically. It is shown that she has been shaped by her desperate financial insecurity and dependence on the goodwill of others, in fact by the survival techniques she has had to acquire as a poor, middle-class woman in a man's world. As with so many other middle-class women of her time who were compelled to earn their own living, to be a governess is one of the few means available and marriage the only way of escape.

The necessity of conforming to the Angel in the House myth and the difficulties of doing so, are illustrated in the character of Cynthia. Like Mrs Gibson, Cynthia is in a position where she survives by charm. The superficial differences between Cynthia and her mother, and the tension which often exists between them, are outweighed by the implications in the text that they are more alike in character than they may seem and that therefore similar behaviour may be expected from them. Cynthia shares her mother's propensity for concealment, and both mother and daughter succeed, at different times, in making a scapegoat of Molly. The physical resemblance between Cynthia and her mother is not great, but the lack of expression in the eyes of both is mentioned. Mrs Gibson's eyes "were soft, large,

and china-blue in colour; they had not much expression or shadow about them . . ." (98). Cynthia's eyes "were beautifully shaped, but their expression hardly seemed to vary . . ." (224). A lack of expression in the eyes seems here to denote both a certain shared shallowness of character and, if the eyes are considered as the windows of the soul, a shuttering against what is really going on in the mind. But the essential difference between mother and daughter lies in Mrs Gibson's self-deception in contrast to Cynthia's much clearer understanding of her own character. Cynthia's suitable marriage, and the fact that she will be required to leave Hollingford to live in London, neatly solve her problems of poverty, a somewhat uneasy social position, and the proximity of Robert Preston. But it is implied, though never overtly, that there is little option for Cynthia but to marry as advantageously as she can. Cynthia's greater problem, as Patsy Stoneman puts it, is that "although she excels in the art of pleasing, attracting multiple offers of marriage, she does not relish marriage." Stoneman continues with the observation that Cynthia is not afraid of "losing Prince Charming but [of] having to marry him after the ball is over".[12] Although Cynthia observes: "I sometimes think I am the kind of person of which old maids are made!" (571), a girl in her position cannot seriously consider remaining single, for both social and financial reasons: the Angel myth is far too compelling. Even on the point of becoming engaged to

[12]Stoneman 181.

Mr Henderson, however, Cynthia casts a fleeting, backward glance at her plan to go to Russia as a governess: "The idea of a residence in a new, strange country, among new, strange people, was not without allurement to Cynthia" (630).

Mrs Hamley is the nearest approach in the novel to a true Angel, but at a severe cost to herself. Squire Hamley dislikes London, dislikes his wife being away, and dislikes most company, so Mrs Hamley remains with him in the country in almost total seclusion:

> She was gentle and sentimental; tender and good. She gave up her visits to London; she gave up her sociable pleasure in the company of her fellows in education and position. . . . He loved his wife all the more dearly for her sacrifices for him; but, deprived of all her strong interests, she sank into ill-health; nothing definite; only she never was well. (41-42)

The Hamleys' marriage conforms to the stereotype of the Angel myth and is described as very happy, but it can only be so at the cost of total self-immolation on the part of Mrs Hamley. It is another illustration of the debilitating effects on women of living according to the myth, of the way they "kill" themselves.

Elizabeth Gaskell's pessimism concerning women's life choices, so apparent after writing the *Life*, results in the creation of a rather different kind of hero in *Wives and Daughters*. Roger Hamley exemplifies Showalter's theory, mentioned in the previous chapter, that the heroes of Victorian novels written by women may be embodiments of what women might do and be, given the power and opportunities of men. Roger suffers no confinement as Molly and Cynthia do, but travels the world and becomes

famous as a scientist. There is no question of his intellectual curiosity being stifled, or his education curtailed, as Molly's are by her father's ill-conceived wish. With this physical and intellectual freedom Roger combines nurturing qualities usually ascribed to women. Patsy Stoneman draws attention to these qualities in both Roger and Mr Gibson,[13] and Jenny Uglow points out that the language Gaskell uses to describe Roger is frequently maternal ('cherishing,' 'nursing,' 'homely'): "Like Molly's doctor father, he seeks to protect and nurture as well as define and diagnose."[14] In both these male characters, Elizabeth Gaskell demonstrates the generally underrated feminine capacity to care in men.

The mythic narrative which emerges from *Wives and Daughters* bears several paradoxical strands. Progress, in the form here of social change, will result in power residing in ruthless men who have risen through commerce. Or, progress will result in power being in the hands of caring men of science. The Christian myth is evoked by a small community where people are neighbourly and comfortably secure in their place in the social order. However, that same small community is claustrophobic, backbiting, and victimizes the innocent. The myth of the Angel in the House is so entrenched that women have little option but to at least appear to conform and, in its guise of marriage followed by domesticity it can, at least,

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[13] Stoneman 177-78.

[14] Uglow 584.

provide a solution and an escape, as it does for Mrs Gibson and Cynthia, possibly even a happy ending. But the novel suggests that attempting to live the Angel myth through self-sacrifice distorts women's lives, cramping and maiming them, and is liable to lead to deep unhappiness, and that this problem cannot be resolved by the law of the public sphere.

On 12th November 1865, when Elizabeth Gaskell died suddenly, she had not quite completed *Wives and Daughters*. Serialization had begun in the *Cornhill* in August 1864, and her last chapter was published, in its unfinished state, in January 1866, with a postscript by Frederick Greenwood, the magazine's editor. Almost certainly the January episode would have been the last, as Greenwood indicates:

> But if the work is not quite complete, little remains to be added to it, and that little has been distinctly reflected into our minds. We know that Roger Hamley will marry Molly, and that is what we are most concerned about. Indeed, there was little else to tell.[15]

Elizabeth Gaskell's biographer, Winifred Gérin, assumes, like Frederick Greenwood, that Molly and Roger were destined to marry and writes in the final chapter of her biography:

> Everyone knew how the story would finish now - she had often enough discussed it with her daughters. She had brought Roger and Molly to an understanding, and though he was in Africa for six months to complete his findings there, everyone knew that he must come back.[16]

[15]Frederick Greenwood, postscript to *Wives and Daughters*.

[16]Gérin, *Elizabeth Gaskell* 302. Gérin, however, provides no evidence of the "discussion" in the form of references.

The assumption that there was to be a happy ending seems justified by the traditions of the mid-Victorian novel. As with Charlotte Brontë in the case of *Villette*, Elizabeth Gaskell would have felt some pressure to finish her story happily, although any such pressure is unlikely to have been as direct as Patrick Brontë's appeal. Superficially, because of their settings, *Wives and Daughters* bears a marked resemblance to *Cranford* and Gaskell's readers, many of whom seem to have cherished a great affection for *Cranford*, would have found an unhappy ending in the later novel disappointing. According to the conventions of such novels, the way in which *Wives and Daughters* should end is with the marriage of Molly and Roger.

The final chapter of the novel may indeed have culminated in the expected happy ending and it seems probable that it was Elizabeth Gaskell's conscious intention to recapture the happiness of *Cranford*. In 1865, when she was in the process of creating *Wives and Daughters*, she wrote the following words to John Ruskin:

> about 'Cranford' I am so much pleased you like it. It is the only one of my books that I can read again;- but whenever I am ailing and ill, I take 'Cranford' and - I was going to say *enjoy* it! (but that would not be pretty!) laugh over it afresh![17]

Setting *Wives and Daughters* in the small country town of Hollingford - the twin of Cranford itself - may perhaps have been an attempt to recapture the mood of *Cranford* and there are occasions when this does indeed happen. However,

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[17] *GL* 562 (747).

the undercurrent of sadness that repeatedly surfaces in *Wives and Daughters*, disrupts the attempt to recreate the mood of Gaskell's previous novel. There are many elements in the unfinished text which imply the possibility of an alternative to the happy uniting of Molly and Roger, and suggest that it was now not so easy for the author to provide such an ending. Molly Gibson is a heroine who seems destined to suffer: there is a constant whittling away of everything on which her happiness and security depend. Her happy home life and affectionate intimacy with her father are lost when he remarries; her old nurse leaves her; Mrs Hamley, in some ways her substitute mother, dies; Roger's interest is transferred to Cynthia; and her good name is temporarily lost. The partial restorations which are made to her never appear to be enough to compensate for the suffering she endures. Where Cynthia escapes her circumstances through marriage Molly is still, when Gaskell's narrative ceases, in the role of daughter.

The sense of parting with which the story is left, with Roger's return to Africa (where he was once before dangerously ill with fever); the fact that though there may be an "understanding" between Molly and Roger, no formal declaration has been made; Molly's propensity for loss and the textual suggestions that her fate is to be a daughter where Cynthia's is to be a wife; all accumulate to imply that a happy ending need not be inevitable.

Immediately before the story breaks off, there is the comic but faintly unnerving incident in which Mrs Gibson interposes herself between Roger and Molly and prevents the exchange of farewells between them, an incident which could

be construed as foreshadowing their permanent separation. In spite of Greenwood's confidence in a happy ending in the form of a marriage between Molly and Roger, it might be remembered that neither of the two novels which immediately precede *Wives and Daughters* (*Sylvia's Lovers* and *Cousin Phillis*) has a happy ending with lovers united.

An analogy could be drawn between Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and *Wives and Daughters* in the fact that the hero, at the end of the novel, leaves the heroine and departs overseas on urgent business. Although the ending of *Villette* is ambiguous, it can be inferred that Paul Emanuel is shipwrecked on the return journey and is drowned. Perhaps a similar fate lay in wait for Roger Hamley. The novel's unfinished state means that no pattern can be confirmed, either redeeming Molly's suffering and producing a happy ending for her, or perpetuating the tone with a sad ending, reinforcing the feeling that Molly's fate is always to experience loss. A bitter-sweet ending, with Roger's death in Africa but Molly finding at least some happiness as daughter, aunt, sister, and friend, would seem to be totally appropriate to the tone and content of *Wives and Daughters*.

In spite of the many comic moments in the novel and the satisfactory disposal of Cynthia by marriage to a handsome, elegant and wealthy man, the covert plot of *Wives and Daughters* keeps bubbling to the surface, and matters such as the isolation and restriction of women's lives - perhaps Charlotte Brontë's "things of which it is wiser not to think too often" - keep returning. Frederick Greenwood's postscript to *Wives and Daughters* does provide

some sense of closure to the novel, though Greenwood's suppositions are naturally no substitute for Elizabeth Gaskell's own completion. The fact that Greenwood's postscript was seen as necessary at the time of publication, and has since been incorporated as part of the text of the novel by twentieth-century editors, demonstrates Peter Brooks' contention that plots were keenly desired in the nineteenth century and that they continue to be desired. As Brooks suggests, it may be that the decline of providential plots produced the desire for some perceptible design in narrative and particularly for a strong sense of closure.

Still, there is a tension in *Wives and Daughters* between the social and domestic worlds which ultimately cannot be resolved. While the social sphere may be depicted as an arena in which social difficulties can be resolved, often through "contact," this can no longer be done in the domestic sphere. Distinct and separate laws govern the two areas and it is difficult to reconcile the generally harmonious social relations with the message of the covert plot. It is as though the overt and covert plots can neither be held in balance nor meet so that aesthetic cohesion is damaged, and there can, therefore, be no strong feeling of closure. Maintaining the paradox becomes difficult for Elizabeth Gaskell because of the force with which the repressed position of women and the power of family are presented. The vision of social harmony in *Wives and Daughters* is displaced to the recent past but the position of women is such that it cannot be dealt with in the same way. It has become too pressing a

problem for the novel to maintain a satisfactory closure. *Wives and Daughters*, with its unfinished condition and overt and covert plots, is indeed a case study in the problems of endings.

CONCLUSION

By the mid nineteenth century when Elizabeth Gaskell was writing, providential plots assuming the existence of God, in which God or Providence orders and resolves the course of human lives, had largely been replaced by plots where the onus of narrative resolution is on human agency. In the absence of providential plots such plots were keenly desired, Peter Brooks suggests, because they provided a way in which to organize and explain the world. Classic "realist" Victorian novels offered too, by means of the mythic narrative created, a sense of closure, or completion. Elizabeth Gaskell's novels are a part of this tradition, written in the context of her residence in the "social laboratory" of Manchester and reflecting something of her Unitarian beliefs. They emanate from a background of social uncertainty concerning issues such as the rapid spread of industrialization, the position of women, and religious doubt in the face of the advance of science.

In Gaskell's first novel, *Mary Barton*, the plot is resolved by a variety of means. Melodrama is employed as a way of suggesting reconciliation between classes, and the devices of marriage and emigration bring the story to an end. A distinction must be made, however, between resolving the plot of the novel and resolving the problems with which the text deals. While the plot is resolved, the problems are not: the conflicts they encompass are held in suspension by the mythic narrative. The contradictory ideas within the myths of progress (that progress is both beneficial and destructive); scientism (the common humanity yet otherness of the poor); emigration (leave and prosper/

remain and fight); the Angel in the House (to be aspired to but impossible to achieve); and the Christian myth (social solutions through goodwill/the fallibility of human nature); are generally maintained in a balance which provides the sense of an ending to *Mary Barton*. However, the strength of the picture of the sufferings of the poor tends to threaten the balance of the myth of progress and the transfer to melodrama to achieve a fantasy solution of social reconciliation also presents a problem. Moreover, the flight to Canada of the main characters carries the implication that although this particular plot has been resolved, an unfinished narrative remains in Manchester. But in spite of these problems, I would argue that although the balance of the mythic narrative is a little uncertain at times and aesthetic cohesion could be said to suffer, a sense of closure still exists.

Where *Mary Barton* is concerned very largely with the social sphere beyond the home and family, *North and South* deals with both the public and the domestic. It raises issues of gender in the form of Margaret's trespass into the public sphere and the shift of power that occurs between Margaret and Thornton at the end of the novel; the Angel in the House myth also assumes greater prominence than in *Mary Barton*. The mythic narrative of *North and South* successfully maintains the conflicting elements within prevailing myths in suspension. Resolution of the plot is largely through marriage, which is symbolic of a healing of the dichotomies which the novel sets up between rich and poor, trade and profession, and north and south. The ending also hints at an accommodation between the sexes

which would result in a much more equal partnership than is figured in the Angel myth. In fact, the marriage between Margaret Hale and John Thornton has to bear almost the whole weight of the resolution. The exception to this is the development of friendship between John Thornton and Nicholas Higgins, which serves to reduce class antagonism, and as a device for resolution, whatever its shortcomings, works far better than Mr Carson's conversion in *Mary Barton*. In spite of the weight which the marriage solution must bear, the mythic narrative balances the contradictory aspects of prevailing myths very successfully in *North and South*, producing aesthetic cohesion and, therefore, a sense of firm closure.

David Lodge's *Nice Work* underlines the nature of the social myths of *North and South* by providing twentieth century equivalents and also, through parody, demonstrates the mechanisms of plotting. However, dichotomies are not healed in *Nice Work* and the narrative moves away from realism and into the mode of fantasy in order to produce a sense of closure. Because of the similarities in plot of the two novels, the over-manipulated ending and the use of fantasy in *Nice Work* underline the strong sense of closure achieved in the classic realist tradition exemplified by *North and South*.

The pivotal text in Elizabeth Gaskell's writing is *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. The text is set largely in the domestic sphere. Here the myth of the Angel in the House is dominant and the mythic narrative contrives to keep the tensions within that myth - conflicts between "self" and "duty" - balanced. The narrative of the *Life* takes the

form of a story of deprivation, grief, artistic achievement, brief marital happiness, and, ultimately, tragic death, ennobling Charlotte Brontë. However, the sense of closure in the biography is obtained only at the cost of denial and suppression of those elements which would have disrupted the carefully constructed "plot." The writing of her friend's biography forced Gaskell to confront the difficulties and constraints in the lives of women and the almost insoluble problem, for women writers, of how to reconcile duty with desire and autonomy. The tensions induced by writing the *Life* manifest themselves in Elizabeth Gaskell's later writing, particularly in *Wives and Daughters*.

Although both the public social sphere and the domestic sphere are dealt with in *Wives and Daughters*, by far the heaviest emphasis is on the domestic. Within the mythic narrative, the conflicts apparent in the myths of progress and scientism and the Christian myth, are kept in suspension but trouble arises with the myth of the Angel in the House. Problems which were beginning to become apparent in earlier work now come to a head and a feeling of the difficulty of closure pervades the novel. The overt and covert plots of *Wives and Daughters* are irreconcilable: the book is both social comedy and minor tragedy. Conflicting ideas within the Angel myth cannot be held in balance, for there seems to be nothing to be said in its favour. Women are shown attempting to conform to the myth for their very survival but the damaging, even deadly, results of such conformity are all too clearly illustrated. In the social sphere, using a setting in the past, a

generally harmonious society can be presented but in the domestic sphere, with so clear a depiction of the restraint and repression of women through the power of the family, marriage can no longer be considered as the dominant element of closure, nor the home a haven. The unresolved conflicts underlying the novel would have ensured that there could be no firm sense of closure, even had *Wives and Daughters* not been left unfinished by Elizabeth Gaskell's untimely death. If Gaskell had completed the story with the marriage of Molly and Roger, that marriage would not have been able to overshadow the problems in the rest of the novel. The sense of closure so produced, I would argue, would have been scarcely greater than that produced by Frederick Greenwood's postscript.

Greenwood's postscript and the evidence it gives of our desire for plots, leads me to reflect on the "plot" which I have been constructing throughout this thesis. In support of my argument that Elizabeth Gaskell found it increasingly difficult to produce closure in her work, I discuss her first novel and her last, one major novel written in mid career, and her single biography. Although the thesis traverses her full writing career, it certainly in no way covers it. There must, of course, be many omissions. I have not discussed *Cranford*, *Ruth*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, or *Cousin Phillis*, nor any of Gaskell's numerous short stories, her journal articles, or the early poems written with William Gaskell. The material I use is necessarily selective and perhaps, had alternative material been used, my conclusions might have been quite different. But a "story" has been created - my story about Elizabeth

Gaskell's work - which, if nothing else, supports Peter Brooks' contention that we cannot do without stories in our lives and must constantly manufacture plots in order to produce meaning.

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